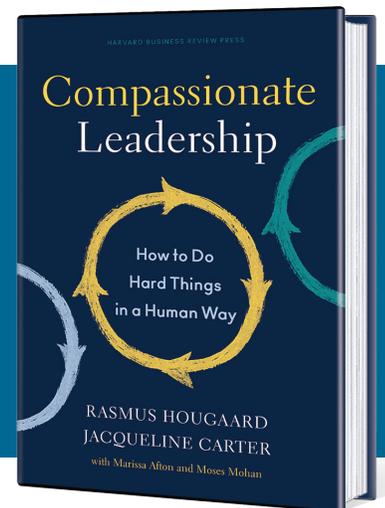


Compassionate Leadership

How to Do Hard Things in a Human Way

A book excerpt by Mobius Friend, Next Practice Institute Keynote speaker, and Founder of Potential Project Rasmus Hougaard and his colleague and co-author, Jacqueline Carter



INTRODUCTION

The Wise Compassion Flywheel

Our research shows that there are four skill sets needed for a leader to operate with wise compassion when doing hard things. The first is to have caring presence: to be here now, with the person you are with. The second is to have caring courage: to choose courage over comfort. The third is to have caring candor, because direct is faster. And the fourth is to act with caring transparency, remembering that clarity is kindness. When practiced in this order, these four skills can create a virtuous cycle that we call the Wise Compassion Flywheel. You can see this cycle in the figure on page 42.

As we start to spin the Wise Compassion Flywheel, we are present when doing hard things, and we have the courage to show up with candor and transparency. When you show up in this way, it creates greater trust and psychological safety in your teams. Why? Because people know exactly where you stand and where they stand. They know you will speak your mind and that there is nothing you hold back. They can trust you and feel safe and cared for in your presence.

When spinning the flywheel, we enable others to show up with presence, courage, candor, and transparency. Over time this becomes our culture.

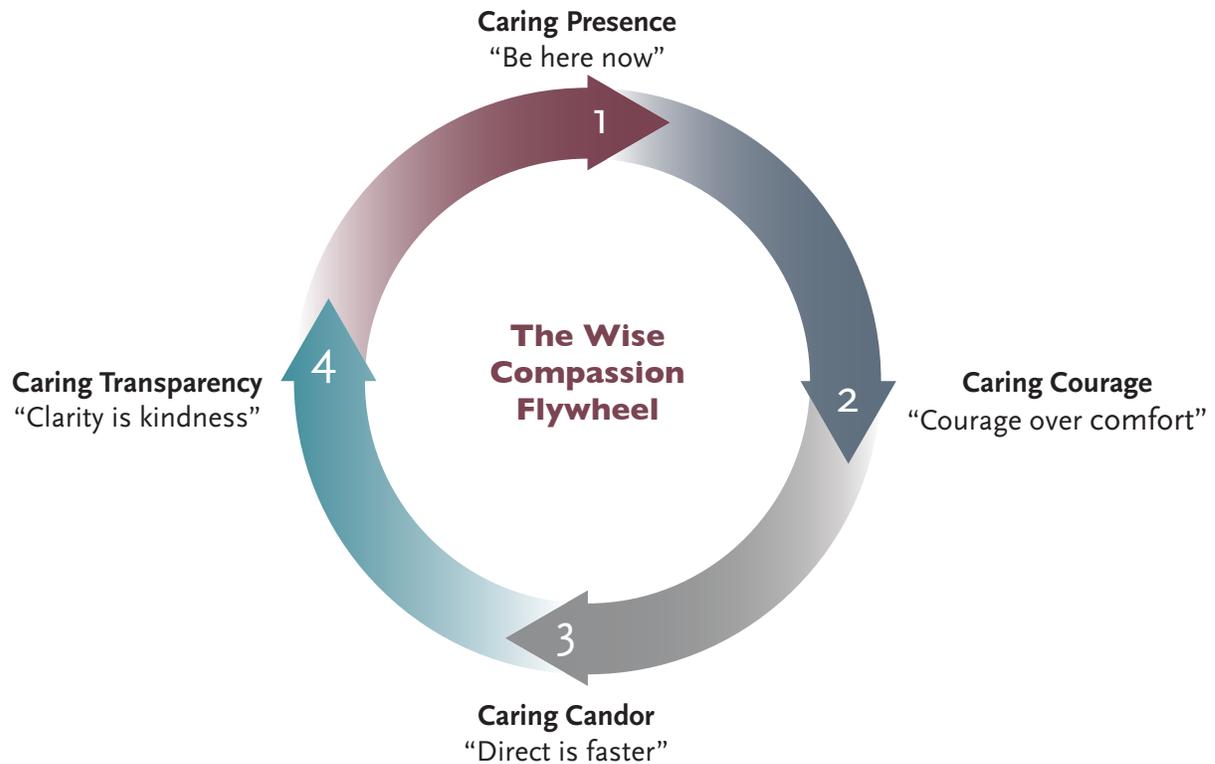
We unleash the best in each other and cultivate happier, healthier, and more productive teams and companies.

Getting to Wise Compassion

With this book, we offer you everything we have learned about becoming a wise and compassionate leader. It is based on the best advice from the many seasoned executives we spoke with. It is based on more than one million data points from our research. It is based on fieldwork in more than five hundred companies. And it is based on the collective intelligence of everyone in our organization.

To make it easy for you, we have condensed it all into ten simple principles or mantras. The mantras are designed to be easy to remember and apply. But keep in mind that the idea of these mantras is that they are more than just words; they are concepts to be mastered so they become habitual to how we lead. This is to say, remembering and practicing them on a daily basis is what will make you a wiser, more compassionate leader. These mantras may seem deceptively simple and make intuitive sense, but they require testing, reflecting, and repeating. There is a deeper level to them all that you will only realize when you start to explore and practice them in day-to-day leadership. The following is an overview of the mantras and a preview of what's to come in each chapter.

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1. **Unlearn Management, Relearn Being Human.** Wise compassionate leadership is about creating truly human connections between yourself and the people you lead. The problem with many management training programs is that they risk turning leaders into robotic managers, often speaking and behaving based on scripts and models. Chapter 1 shows you how to lead as an authentic human being to improve followership, commitment, and sense of belonging.
2. **Great Power Comes with Great Responsibility.** Wise compassionate leaders realize that they have an enormous impact on the people they lead. Therefore, when doing hard things to others, we must ensure we do them in the most human way. Chapter 2 provides guidance on leading with skillful means, reflecting on our company’s purpose, and ensuring we are considering the greater good.
3. **Connect with Empathy, Lead with Compassion.** Empathy is important. It enables us to connect with other human beings. But in leadership, empathy has its downsides. We can have empathetic burnout or care so much that

we avoid taking necessary action (caring avoidance). Chapter 3 explores how compassion is empathy plus action, and how it enables us to connect with others while also doing necessary hard things.

4. **Your Oxygen Mask First.** Many senior leaders are plagued by self-criticism and self-judgment. Research shows that is a poor mental and emotional state for achieving excellent performance. Chapter 4 dives in to how to silence the inner critic and embrace strong self-compassion as keys to leading others with wise compassion.
5. **Busyness Kills Your Heart.** We’re all busy juggling many priorities. But that does not mean we have to feel busy inside. In today’s fast-paced culture, being busy is a badge of honor. But busyness is a choice—and a bad choice, at that. Busyness kills our heart and thereby our ability to do hard things in a human way. Chapter 5 provides strategies for how wise compassionate leaders can recognize and avoid the busyness trap.
6. **Be Here Now.** Mindfulness enables compassion. Our research shows that the more mindful

we are, the more we're capable of greater wisdom and compassion. Because of this, wise compassionate leaders benefit from cultivating greater awareness of their own mind and the mental experiences of others. Chapter 6 covers the first, foundational step, in the Wise Compassion Flywheel.

7. **Courage over Comfort.** Making hard decisions often means that others disagree with you, resulting in a confrontation. Having the courage to willingly approach confrontation is one of the most important skills of wise compassionate leaders. Chapter 7 helps you develop the ability to choose courage over comfort; we examine the fear-based boundaries we need to cross to bring more courage into our leadership.
8. **Direct Is Faster.** Wise compassion is the difficult art of balancing professional candor—or directness—with personal care. We must hold people accountable while maintaining a level of compassion. This type of directness, done with care and courage, is always faster. Chapter 8 focuses on how to apply caring directness, so people receive necessary messages quickly, enabling real conversations to begin.
9. **Clarity Is Kindness.** As leaders, we need to be transparent. If not, people will not know where we stand and what awaits them. But if we are clear and open, it helps create a culture of transparency that fosters a greater sense of psychological safety. Chapter 9 covers how being transparent and clear is both a wise and a kind way to lead that, in turn, enables us to be more “here now,” enabling the Wise Compassion Flywheel to spin.
10. **The Only Way Out Is Through.** In chapter 10, we reveal how to make doing hard things easy: practice. In the complex dynamics of navigating difficult conversations, the only way out is through—and by through, we mean through doing. By stepping into a difficult situation and coming out on the other side with a little more wisdom and a little more compassion, we become more skillful at doing the hard things necessary to lead in a wise compassionate way.

Each of these mantras can be read as a modular experience with its own specific tools and techniques. There is much to be learned by embracing each individual mantra—and you'll see immediate improvement in your leadership practice. This means you can jump from chapter to chapter and pull out what you need, when you need it.

But there is an advantage to reading the chapters and embracing the mantras in order. They are designed to follow a specific logic that builds proficiency through the understanding and implementation of each one. The first five chapters help you develop the mindsets for wise compassionate leadership. The next five chapters (chapters 6 through 10) help you to hone the skill sets of wise compassion. These last chapters are each a deep dive into the individual elements of the Wise Compassion Flywheel, helping you to lead from the second quadrant of the illustration on page 40: Wise Compassion.

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of our research and our work is to create a more human world of work. It is our hope that this book will make you a catalyst in this movement. We bring its insights and strategies to you with great confidence, knowing that if you put them into action, you will become an even better leader who is able to do hard things in a human way.

THE AFTERWORD

Your Transformation Makes for a More Human World of Work

Becoming a wise and compassionate leader is a challenging but deeply rewarding process. It is an experience of personal and professional transformation. And it is a lifelong journey. In the many interviews we conducted for this book, a clear pattern emerged. One of our questions was, “Knowing what you know now, what would you have told your younger self?” Nearly all the responses focused on being more courageous earlier to more readily do the hard things of leadership. Rich Lesser, CEO of Boston Consulting Group, put it this way: “One of the lessons I wish I learned when I was younger is to have harder conversations earlier. When I was younger, I was way too cautious. I was either worried I might lose people or worried I would make them unhappy. As

“In compassion, when we feel with the other, we dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and we put another person there.”

— KAREN ARMSTRONG

I have matured as a leader, I have become better at immediately addressing issues.”

This response is both hopeful and informative. It is hopeful because it shows that wise compassionate leadership is effective— that bringing the most human aspects of ourselves into the workplace can raise performance and improve results. It is informative because it reflects the fact that wise compassionate leadership is developed through practice and experience. But it is important to keep in mind that we must be deliberate in this practice. Wise compassionate leadership does not happen unless we put in the effort. Just as musicians and athletes practice their professions, we, too, must practice to become good leaders. As you pay close attention to how you think, speak, and act, with the mission of developing wise compassion, you can gradually shape your character. You can soften your hard edges and transform yourself into a more effective leader.

Be forewarned, though, that practicing wise compassion is not easy. As you’ve discovered throughout this book, wise compassion can often conflict with our neurological wiring. It sometimes can make us unpopular. And it definitely requires a lot of courage. But hardship and challenges, especially with the people we lead, are worthwhile prices to pay in the journey of becoming a truly great leader. Breakthrough leadership comes from having had many great challenges with the people we lead. Each of these experiences provides us with vital learning and acts as a catalyst to be and do better. In truth, the more challenging or difficult people are, the greater the gift they offer us. This sounds counterintuitive. But in bringing great challenges, other people provide the opportunity for us to strengthen our wisdom and compassion.

Think about this idea for a moment: the people who pose the biggest challenge often provide us the greatest opportunity for our own development and

growth. In this way, people provide the critical fuel for us to become compassionate leaders. Nearly every situation is an opportunity to learn. And the more we learn, the better we become. When we experience challenges from the people we work with, we have a choice: we can either resist them or we can see the situation as an opportunity to practice our leadership and our compassion.

Therefore, when people offer you a challenge, welcome it. See it as a gift.

Challenges make you better. They make you work. Avoid pointing fingers or blaming others. Rather, ask yourself what you can learn from the challenge in front of you. Don’t pity yourself, and instead see it as another opportunity for lifelong growth. When challenging things happen in relation to other people, train yourself to avoid saying things like “Why did this happen to me, and especially today when I’m so busy?” Instead, begin saying, “Here’s a great opportunity for growth. I’m lucky to experience this right now. Even if it takes up a bit of my time, it’s time well spent.” This is the shift from resistance and avoidance to gratitude and responsiveness.

“Comfort and growth can never coexist,” Ginni Rometty, chairwoman and former CEO of IBM, told us. “It’s through doing hard and difficult things that you grow and become better. Don’t wait until later in your career to make hard decisions. Frontload your career, so these experiences will make you grow and become a great role model for others.”

By putting ourselves on the line, facing and embracing hardship, we can transform and develop more wise compassion for others. To really see and understand the perspectives of people, Francine Katsoudas, chief people, policy & purpose officer of Cisco, asked her entire management team to individually have conversations with two people who had just been told they were being let go. She



Imagination by Jim McManus, Mobius featured artist

wanted them to connect with people impacted to not only demonstrate that they cared, but to have the opportunity to learn from hearing first-hand about the employees' experience. We learn nothing by trying to avoid the difficulties coming from leading others. If you want to truly grow, you must turn toward, not away from, the opportunities for practice that you are offered. Whenever you experience a challenging situation with another person, ask yourself two questions: "What can I learn from this?" And, "How can I bring kindness and wisdom to this situation?"

Hard Times, Great Hope

Former US president Barack Obama had a plaque on his desk that read, "Hard things are hard." This is an important reminder for all of us. Being a leader is not easy—it's hard. We should remember this so we are not surprised when we face difficult situations and find them challenging. Remembering that leadership is hard helps us to overcome these difficult situations and acknowledge other people's hardships with compassion. If we remember that leadership is hard, we can see leadership as an opportunity to grow into every day, rather than be overwhelmed by it. We lead because people and organizations need leaders, and doing hard things is par for the course.

Consequently, remind yourself every day that challenges and hard decisions are bound to come your way. This may be the single most inevitable aspect of leadership. Challenges are not mistakes. And they are not anyone's fault. No one is to blame. When we acknowledge this reality, we can make necessary decisions in a way that serves the greater good, even when they negatively impact individuals. And we can do it with caring presence, caring courage, caring candor, and caring transparency. The harder the times, the harder the decisions that will need to be made. And the harder the decisions, the bigger the need for

making and implementing them in a human way.

In hard times and in hard situations, your impact and your legacy are amplified. For you as a leader, hard situations offer unique opportunities to clearly define and state who you are and what you stand for. Don't squander these chances. Also, keep in mind that any small, kind action will be experienced more strongly during periods of duress than during normal times. Likewise, any unkind action will be amplified. As the impact of your actions is amplified, so is your legacy. You will be best remembered for the decisions you make and the actions you take during difficult times.

There are many reasons to be concerned about the state of the world. But there are also compelling reasons to be optimistic. We at Potential Project have a unique vantage point for observing the state of individuals, organizations, countries, and the world. Through our work with leaders of companies and public organizations, we see a massive global movement. This movement includes an increase in human, social, and environmental responsibility. It includes the incorporation of purpose and strong values as part of taking action.

It is a movement of wise and compassionate leadership.

Embracing the challenge of becoming a wise compassionate leader is an urgent calling. The fact that you, like thousands of other leaders, are reading this book now shows there is much good in the world—and this goodness is gaining momentum. We are confident humankind will make the changes needed to improve our world, our societies, and our organizations. But we also know this will require the effort of every single person capable of influencing others through wisdom and compassion. You've already shown your commitment to this change. We hope this book has provided you with the inspiration and the tools to be an even bigger part of creating a more human world of work. ■