RESEARCH PAPER

TOWARDS MORE COMPASSIONATE WORKPLACES

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those who took part in this study. I thank you for being generous with your time and participating in the interviews, focus groups and the survey. I appreciate your trust and honesty in sharing your experience of compassion in your workplaces.

Finally, I would like to thank Michael Jenkins and Dan Lucy who provided valuable help and support in the course of this study.
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Introduction

In 2016 we published our first research paper on compassionate leadership called ‘Compassionate leadership: what is it and why do organisations need more of it?’. In that paper I identified the characteristics of a compassionate leader and the stages that may lead to an individual acting compassionately. The paper also included some evidence from previous studies about the benefits of compassion in the workplace which were used to build a business case for compassionate leadership. Over the past five years Michael Jenkins, the CEO of Roffey Park, and I have delivered a number of presentations and workshops on compassion in the workplace in various countries including the UK, Singapore, Thailand, Spain and Italy. Working on this topic helped us to realise even more how much potential the idea has for creating a better work environment. Based on conversations with colleagues in various fields and with audiences around the country we decided to launch this new study about compassion in the workplace. This study explores the following questions:

• How can we build a compassionate organisation?
• How do we build a compassionate culture?
• Where to start from, what might get in the way and what might help us in doing this?

I used different sources of information to answer these questions. A survey was designed mainly about people’s experience of compassion in their work environment and how they perceived the impact of compassion on themselves and their organisation. More than 400 people from different sectors completed the survey. We conducted three focus groups and four in-depth interviews with managers from the private sector and not for profit about their views of compassion in the workplace and how a compassionate culture could be encouraged.
What is a compassionate organisation?

Figure 1 below shows some of the characteristics of a compassionate workplace identified by the participants.

A compassionate organisation is where people trust each other and feel it is acceptable to talk about their problems and to seek help and support. In such an organisation people know that if they talk about their problems, other colleagues will not judge them and will listen and try to help. There are also mechanisms in such organisations that people can use to seek help and support for themselves or other colleagues.
Why study compassion in organisations?

Over the past few years of working on this topic, I have found substantial evidence to support the hypothesis that compassion in the work environment improves staff wellbeing and positively impacts the bottom line. In this section I’ll share some of this evidence together with the findings from the survey.

Compassion in the work environment and staff well-being

There is strong scientific evidence for the link between stress and illness. Selye (1950) was one of the pioneers in this field of study who found that stress compromises the body’s immune system. Another study by McEven and Stellar (1993) shows that stress can compromise the immune system so severely that it raises blood pressure, weakens resistance to viral infections, and increases the risk of heart attacks and speeds up the spread of cancer.

In an interesting experiment (published in the Journal of Advancement in Medicine, 1995) researchers demonstrated just how long the effects of stress can remain in the body. The experiment involved two groups of healthy volunteers which one group was asked to spend five minutes thinking about an experience that made them angry and the other group were asked to think about an experience of care and compassion. Researchers then measured their IgA (a key immune system antibody which helps the body resist invading bacteria and viruses). For the first group (the ones remembering an angry or frustrating situation) their IgA level increased briefly and then dropped substantially and stayed low for five hours. The IgA level of the second group (the ones focused on care and compassion feelings) rose and stayed at a high level for six hours. This study suggests that simply remembering an emotion can have significant impact on our immune system. Now imagine experiencing those negative emotions on a daily basis and their impact on our bodies.

Based on these studies the link between compassionate workplaces and staff wellbeing is self-explanatory. A compassionate workplace in which people feel safe to share their problems and seek help will help to reduce the level of stress and consequently improve the overall level of staff well-being.

In our survey, 83% of the respondents said that they have been managed by someone who in their view lacked compassion. I asked these people how their manager’s lack of compassion impacted on them and their colleagues. They said it:

- increased their level of stress and anxiety,
- made them feel demotivated and disengaged,
- made them leave the organisation,
- created a culture of distrust, fear, poor performance and dysfunctional teams.

Here are some of the quotes from the respondents:

“Did not feel appreciated as an individual. Felt that I was only there to do a job. Did not feel cared for as a person. Ultimately left the company because I didn’t feel they cared about me as a person, my needs at work or at home or my future development.”
Senior Manager, Private Sector

“I suffered depression a few years ago but continued to work through it. I was open with my manager but she became frustrated at my struggles and effectively set a deadline for my recovery. Her understanding of mental health issues was incredibly poor and as my depression left me vulnerable I was worried I would lose my job. I now enjoy good mental health and have learnt a lot through my experience - particularly in terms of being a sympathetic, listening manager.”
Middle Manager, Public Sector

“It largely manifested as lack of interest in me as a person, which severely limited how much I was prepared to discuss anything with him, both on personal and work matters. Any slight sign that an emotional or personal conversation may happen, he would avoid through humour. We never really developed a full working relationship as a result.”
Senior Manager, Production and Manufacturing

Compassion in the workplace and the bottom line

In my previous research paper I explained some of the benefits of compassion in the workplace. The following is a summary of the benefits I presented in that paper:

- 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 (Lilias et al, 2008).
- Compassion breeds compassion — those who experience it are then more likely to demonstrate it towards others (Goetz et al, 2010).
- Supervisors who perceive that their organisation values their wellbeing are more likely to show supportive behaviour towards the people they manage (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006).
- Not only do people who receive compassion benefit from it, but the person demonstrating compassion also benefits, as do colleagues who witness compassionate acts. This leads to relationships which are stronger and
more positive and therefore more collaboration in the workplace. (Dunn et al, 2008). It also reduces employee turnover and increases organisational citizenship (Lilius et al, 2011; Fryer, 2013).

- Experiencing compassion at work connects co-workers psychologically and results in a stronger bond between them (Frosl et al, 2000).
- Those working in care-giving organisations which are compassionate are more likely to have the emotional resource needed for caring and are less likely to experience burnout (Figley, 1995; Lilius et al, 2011).
- Compassion also can help with growing trust among individuals and creates psychological safety (Worline & Dutton, 2017). This can create a willingness to discuss and learn from errors and failures, talk about them more easily and learn from those mistakes which can result in more innovation.

There is no doubt that all of these can positively impact on an organisation’s performance. Therefore we can argue that compassionate workplaces positively impact on the bottom line. One of the few studies that have examined this is research on the ‘virtuousness’ of an organisation. Cameron and Winn (2012) examined the impact of virtuousness of an organisation on its financial and operational performance. They define virtuousness as characteristics or strengths that represent the best of the human condition and the highest aspirations of a human being. The study shows that compassion as part of the values of an organisation makes a significant difference in productivity and financial performance. In another study they examined the performance of forty business units in the financial services industry over a two year period. They found that when compassion was part of the values of the business unit, as rated by their employees, the unit had a better financial performance and was perceived as more effective by executives as well as having higher employee and customer retention.

I asked participants what the impact of a compassionate culture would be on their organisation’s bottom line. More than four-fifths of the respondents said that a compassionate culture would have a positive or very positive impact on their organisation’s bottom line. We asked participants why they thought compassion would have a positive impact on their organisation’s bottom line. Here is what some of the research participants said about the link between compassion and organisational performance:

- “Our revenue is based on trusted relationships with customers - this improves if employees feel safe and trusted. Productivity is reliant on a reciprocal relationship between employees and the organisation - people will give more when they know they will be given back what’s needed when they need it.” Middle Manager, Private Sector

- “I feel, and I believe research indicates, that everyone feels safer and less fearful when they see others being treated compassionately. It can strengthen one’s own capacity for work when one is helping someone else. It makes the workplace more conducive to general mental wellbeing. When employees really feel they are employed as whole people and not just machines or cogs in a system, they can apply their capabilities to the work wholeheartedly and this improves overall organisational performance.” Non-managerial staff, Public sector

- “I once worked for a company where an entire team became best friends. Within those few years, the company hit higher targets and performed more successfully than it ever had before. In my opinion, the reason for this was the constant compassion and emotional support that was given by the people on the team (friends). With that type of support, everybody felt confident and happy that should anything go wrong, they had people to turn to that would help. I think without that, if anybody is feeling sick or down they can feel alienated and if they worry that someone isn’t going to be supportive it can even make the issue and anxiety worse. More should be done in the work environment to encourage bonding and out of work activities.” Junior Manager, Hospitality Sector

What would be the impact of a compassionate culture on your organisation’s bottom line?

88% 4% 1%
Missed opportunities for compassion

In the survey, I asked participants about missed opportunities for compassion in their workplaces. Figure 2 below shows the result.

- **32%** of respondents said they have missed an opportunity for compassion at work because they felt that it wasn’t professional to express emotion or care for someone.
- **90%** of respondents said they have seen others miss opportunities for compassion because compassion wasn’t seen as part of the job.
- **88%** of respondents said they have witnessed missed opportunities for compassion in the workplace because people were too burdened or burned out to feel empathy and act with compassion.

Figure 2: Missed opportunities for compassion in the workplace

Barriers to compassion in the workplace

Barriers to being more compassionate reported by participants seem to fall into one of these three categories:

- Organisational culture related barriers
- Individual circumstances related barriers
- Policy and procedural related barriers

- Cultural norm of what is, or is not acceptable in the workplace
- Pressure from senior management too focused on outputs
- Managers not feeling empowered to make decisions themselves that enable them to be compassionate
- HR policy is too restrictive e.g. not being able to adapt to individual circumstances
- When policies and procedures are followed to the letter, to the point where you can’t see the real compassionate person
- Too busy to stop and show care
- Low emotional intelligence
- Managers who genuinely don’t care about their teams and focus only on getting the job done whatever the cost
- Being fearful of accidentally discriminating against a person, crossing unseen boundaries, being seen as inconsistent
Creating a compassionate organisation is as much about focusing on individuals (both self and others) as it is about the organisation as a whole. To answer this question I have brought together recommendations from previous studies and findings from focus groups, interviews and workshops and identified three steps to building a compassionate organisation:

Self-compassion

The first step is to be compassionate towards yourself. Neff (2003) defines self-compassion as:

“... being open to and moved by one’s own suffering, experiencing feelings of caring and kindness toward oneself, taking an understanding, non-judgmental attitude toward one’s inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that one’s own experience is part of the common human experience”.

Self-compassion is not about being selfish and self-centred, nor does it mean prioritising personal needs over those of others. It is about understanding your thoughts and feelings as they arise and avoiding pushing them away. It is about giving yourself time and space to recover from those feelings. I suggest that self-compassion is similar to compassion. It is about understanding and acknowledging your feelings and being kind to yourself (non-judgmental). It’s also about avoiding self-pity and being resilient to take appropriate actions. Taking appropriate action could be encouraging gentle change where needed and adjusting patterns of behaviours to avoid similar situations.

Another important aspect of self-compassion is to give yourself time and space to recover from dealing with other people’s problems. Compassion towards others without any self-compassion may have negative consequences. There are people in organisations who voluntarily shoulder the sadness, frustration, bitterness and anger that are endemic to the organisation. In his book, Toxic Emotions at Work, Peter Frost says:

“... being open to and moved by one’s own suffering, experiencing feelings of caring and kindness toward oneself, taking an understanding, non-judgmental attitude toward one’s inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that one’s own experience is part of the common human experience”.

For more information about self-compassion and to test how self-compassionate you are, visit: http://self-compassion.org

In many ways, self-compassion can be viewed as a useful emotional regulation strategy, in which painful or distressing feelings are not avoided but are instead held in awareness with kindness, understanding, and a sense of shared humanity (Kristin Neff, 2003).

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I was the initiator of or accomplice to unhappiness. Often the intensity of the pain being expressed in my office was high, and while the visitors might leave feeling better, I often found myself carrying their pain around with me later, especially if I felt that I had somehow contributed to it.”

This may be discouraging and make you think that it’s better to avoid compassion as you are not only dealing with your own problems and stress but also absorbing other people’s stress too. Sadness, frustration and anger are an inseparable part of any social structure as well as happiness and joy. It is not possible to completely avoid work related issues especially if it is about people who are struggling with something. By being compassionate toward others, as well as yourself, you can create a working environment that is pleasant for everyone.

Compassion toward others

The next step is about being a compassionate colleague. Compassion is about understanding colleagues’ pain and problem and taking action to lessen their suffering. At Roffey Park we have identified 5 attributes for a compassionate person in a work environment. To help you to improve or enhance your compassion in the workplace, we have suggested some practical tips relating to each of the five key attributes below.

**BEING ALIVE TO THE SUFFERING OF OTHERS:** This is about being sensitive to the wellbeing of others and noticing any change in their behaviour. It enables you to notice when others need help.

- Pay close attention to someone when they’re talking with you. What do you notice about them? What is their body language?

- Practise asking questions and then listening to the answers, without judging, taking over, or going into ‘me too’. See if you can have a long conversation where you focus on doing just this.

- Try to develop your curiosity about other people. This is especially useful if that other person is a stranger to you — if they appear to be very unlike you, or if the person is someone to whom you might feel some degree of animosity or perhaps someone at work with whom you habitually experience difficulties.

**BEING NON-JUDGMENTAL:** This is about not judging the sufferer and accepting and validating their experience. 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.

- Intentionally practise seeing the other side of an argument or a point of view.

- Remember the old adage: “Never judge a book by its cover”? We’re very familiar with sayings such as this. Nevertheless, it’s surprising just how often we allow ourselves to be influenced by a deep-seated bias that we didn’t even notice was there.

- Classic compassion blockers – sometimes people will share a problem with you in a way which can make you react inside with: “You think you’ve got problems? Wait until you hear mine!” It’s not about you – so acknowledge that feeling to yourself and then mentally put it to one side if you feel that response rising up in you.

**TOLERATING PERSONAL DISTRESS:** This is about 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.

- Be aware of those situations of your own which make you less tolerant to the distress of others - whether it’s work overload, tight deadlines, or just a particular time of day; whenever possible, try to meet the “person in distress” in other, more favourable circumstances if you can - and make time for them.

- Many managers report anxiety about “delving too deep” when they have a report or peer who is struggling. “If I ask someone why they seem “not themselves these days” – what happens when Pandora’s Box opens and a whole bunch of “stuff” pours out? What do I do?” This is where leadership development around “having difficult conversations” can help.

**BEING EMPATHIC:** Feeling the emotional pain of the person who is suffering is another attribute of a compassionate person.

- Try to discover what you have in common with someone else.

- If you hear someone is going through/has gone through a tough time, try to imagine how they might be feeling...
and then sound them out with phrases such as: “That sounds tough – how are you feeling about it?” or “I would have hated that – but how are you feeling?” or: “I can imagine you might be feeling <emotion>. Is that right?”

**TAKING APPROPRIATE ACTION**: Feeling empathic towards someone encourages you 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 you have made efforts to know the individual.

- Think about the compassionate action you might take. Is it likely to be welcome? Have you thought about how your action might land with the person?
- Is the action you plan to take appropriate for the cultural context? Things you might do in your culture might not have an exact fit if the action you’re planning is intended to help someone from a different cultural background. But with some thought and reflection you will be able to think of something that will work: good intentions can be remarkably transferable across cultures.

When compassion and self-compassion are in balance one can arguably state that this is where strong, warm leaders are found. They are the secure base for their people (Figure 3)³. Conversely, where compassion is high but self-compassion low, you will find people with a “martyr” complex: eager to help others but lacking a true secure base themselves which in turn can create a sense of a lack of authenticity and true “solidity”. Still more problematic are those people in the workplace who have low or very low self-compassion and low or very low compassion: here we find people (at the extreme) with what we might describe as an almost nihilistic outlook on life. And then there are the narcissists: people with low compassion but high self-compassion, where self-compassion has morphed into a kind of total self-absorption.

Fostering a culture of compassion

The third step is creating a culture of compassion in the organisation. In such a culture people trust each other and feel it is acceptable to talk about their problems and seek help and support from their colleagues or the organisation. As a leader you can foster a compassionate culture through:

- Role-modelling compassion by showing compassion towards colleagues and encouraging team members to do the same
- Celebrating, recognising and rewarding compassionate actions
- Encouraging people to share their personal stories of compassion at work to increase empathy and share ideas on how to enhance your organisations’ compassion capabilities
- Promoting healthy practices at work. For example making time for individual one-to-ones
- Actively encouraging and empowering others to respond to a colleague’s suffering
- Making sure that there is a strong connection between people in your team which makes them feel joined, seen, felt, known and not alone
- Creating a safe environment for your team members to share their personal problems, issues and challenges

Activities at an organisational level that foster a compassionate culture include:

- Providing coaching support for leaders to model cultural values that support compassion
- Embedding compassion into company values
- Raising awareness about compassion through compassion training and sharing stories of compassionate decisions or lack of them and their consequences
- Redesigning recruitment processes to emphasize compassion, high quality connection, empathy and which fit cultural values of shared humanity at work
- Creating opportunities to bring people together regularly and enable personal connections to be made
- Designing policies and procedures to give people guidelines on what support mechanisms are available in the organisation. Any policies need to be flexible so they can be adapted depending on people’s personal circumstances

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3 Model of compassion towards others and self-compassion developed by Michael Jenkins (CEO of Roffey Park)
An interesting finding of neuroscience research into leadership development is the discovery of two large scale cortical networks in our brains which can antagonise each other. The two cortical networks are Task-Positive Network (TPN) and Default Mode Network (DMN). TPN gets activated when we need to focus on a task. It’s important for problem solving, decision making and controlling actions. DMN, on the other hand, is important in emotional self-awareness, social cognition, and ethical decision making as well as creativity and insightful problem solving. Studies show that activity in one network inhibits activity in the other network and these two networks cannot stay activated simultaneously. Although individuals use both networks based on the situation, there are people who are inclined to use one network a lot more than the other. For example, people who are highly task oriented will be unaware of their own and other’s emotional needs. Or highly relationship oriented people may also find it difficult to focus and execute a clearly defined goal. However, all tasks have both relational and analytical components and people need to be able to switch between these two networks depending on the situation. Practicing this ability is one of the keys to becoming a more compassionate colleague. (de Zulueta, 2016)

In one of the compassion workshops we were running for a public sector organisation, there was an interesting discussion about whether you need policies in an organisation in order to make sure that people respond compassionately. The majority of people said that organisations do need to have a set of policies to help and support people to make decisions based on individual circumstances. However there were a few people who said they already have a lot of policies in their organisation and adding new policies doesn’t really make a difference. They believed that it’s the people who make the difference and if people are not compassionate, policies can’t make a difference.

I think we need both and perhaps more of the later. As the first group said policies, if implemented correctly, can support people to take appropriate action depending on the situation. They need to give people the freedom to make the right decision while setting the boundaries on the support that the organisation can provide. However, a lack of policies doesn’t mean that people cannot be compassionate. It means that people need to make the effort to find out what support, if any, is available inside and outside the organisation and then decide what the best action is to take. So I would say a lack of policies shouldn’t be considered as a barrier to compassion in the workplace but their existence will facilitate and speed up acts of compassion. Policies can also give guidance and parameters to people about any available support but need to be flexible to let people make decisions and adapt available resources to individual circumstances.
Two large scale cortical networks in our brains, the Task-Positive Network (TPN) and the Default Mode Network (DMN), can antagonise each other. TPN is activated when we need to focus on a task, important for problem solving, decision making, and controlling actions. DMN is important in emotional self-awareness, social cognition, ethical decision making, creativity, and insightful problem solving. Studies show that activity in one network inhibits activity in the other, and these cannot stay activated simultaneously.

Individuals use both networks based on situation, but some are more inclined to use one than the other. Highly task-oriented people may be unaware of their own and others’ emotional needs, while highly relationship-oriented people may find it difficult to focus and execute a clearly defined goal. However, all tasks need both relational and analytical components, and people need to switch between these networks depending on the situation. Practicing this ability is key to becoming a more compassionate colleague.

In a compassion workshop for a public sector organisation, discussions centered on whether policies are needed to ensure compassionate responses. The majority believed policies are necessary to help and support people make decisions based on individual circumstances. A few thought existing policies were enough and adding new ones wouldn’t make a difference. They believed that people make the difference, and policies can’t make a difference if people aren’t compassionate. The workshop concluded that both policies and flexibility are needed, with policies supporting appropriate actions and setting boundaries. A lack of policies shouldn’t be seen as a barrier to compassion, but their existence will facilitate acts of compassion. Policies should be flexible to support decision-making and adapting resources to individual circumstances.

**Concluding remarks**

In this report, I have used evidence from literature and findings from our own research to build the business case for compassion, identify barriers, and explore ways to create more compassionate organisations. My intention was to provide practical steps backed by research to start this process. I acknowledge that this isn’t an easy task, and depending on the organisation’s culture, a complete cultural shift may be required. However, empirical evidence suggests that the three steps I’ve suggested are among the most important activities to encourage more compassion in the workplace and build compassionate organisations.

To recap:

**STEP 1**

Be compassionate towards yourself - Understand your thoughts and feelings as they arise, and avoid pushing them away. Also, give yourself time and space to recover from those feelings.

**STEP 2**

Be compassionate towards others - Understand your colleagues’ pain and problems and take action to lessen their suffering.

**STEP 3**

Foster a culture of compassion – Encourage a culture in your organisation where people trust each other and feel comfortable to talk about their problems and seek help and support from their colleagues or the organisation.
Appendix: Survey respondents’ profile

Respondent Profile by Sector
- Public sector: 15%
- Private sector: 34%
- Not-for-profit sector: 36%
- Production and manufacturing: 15%

Base size (n) = 403

Respondent profile by gender
- Male: 25%
- Female: 74%
- 1% did not provide their gender

Base size (n) = 403

Respondent profile by age
- 20-29: 4%
- 30-37: 11%
- 38-45: 24%
- 46-52: 31%
- 53-60: 25%
- 61+: 5%

Base size (n) = 403

Respondent profile by seniority
- Board Director: 3%
- Other Director/Senior manager: 21%
- Middle Manager: 32%
- Junior Manager: 5%
- Non-Manager: 40%

Base size (n) = 403

Respondent profile by size of organisation
- Up to 50: 36%
- 51 - 100: 32%
- 101 - 250: 20%
- 251 - 1000: 8%
- 1001 - 5000: 4%
- 5001+: 1%

Base size (n) = 403
References


About Roffey Park

Roffey Park is an internationally renowned leadership institute based in the UK and Singapore. We develop people who develop organisations. With over 70 years’ experience of leadership and management development, organisational development, human resources and personal effectiveness, we provide executive education and research to many of the world’s leading companies and organisations.

Roffey Park Employee Research Consultancy

Many organisations commission us to conduct research to gain a better understanding of employee views and perspectives on everything from engagement, how change efforts are being perceived and the value of different HR policies and programmes. We offer a unique combination of expertise in employee research and organisational development. Our expertise includes both quantitative analytics and in-depth qualitative enquiry.

We aim to:
• Tailor our approach to meet your needs and organisational context
• Share our expertise and in-depth research with other organisations from a variety of sectors to provide you with new ideas and different perspectives
• Use the research process as a way for you to reflect on how your overall approach to people issues affects the execution of strategic aims
• Work with you in partnership, working as an extension of your team
• Go beyond the data, generating insights and facilitating change
• Help you demonstrate the impact of what you do

Some things we do:
• Design and develop leadership competency frameworks and 360 assessment tools
• Bespoke research and consultancy on diversity and inclusion
• Demonstrate ROI of leadership development and organisational change programmes
• Action research into leadership and organisational performance
• Design and deliver customised workshops on compassion, trust, resilience and other topics
• Assess and improve organisational performance using diagnostic frameworks such as Burke-Litwin
• Inquire into and develop organisational values

Author’s biography

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Meysam is a member of the research team at Roffey Park. His main areas of interest are around compassion in the workplace, resilience, interpersonal trust and innovation. He is the author of ‘Compassionate leadership: what is it and why do organisations need more of it’ and ‘Towards building more compassionate workplaces’. He has also developed a self-assessment psychometric instruments to measure compassion at the workplace (Compassion at Work Index). Before joining the research team at Roffey Park, Meysam worked as a university lecturer delivering a variety of management courses.

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