Organizational Compassion: A Litmus Test for A Spiritually Centered University Culture

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Forthcoming in the Journal Of Management, Spirituality and Religion, 2010
Abstract

In recent studies compassionate actions taken on behalf of employees in times of personal crisis are a critical litmus test of an authentic spiritual corporate culture. (Delbecq, 2010; Trott, 2008, Frost, Dutton, Maitlis, Jacoba, Lilius, Kanov & Worline, 2006) This is hardly surprising since compassion is an essential spiritual expression across the great traditions. (Armstrong, 1994; Smith, 1991) Here the focus is on normative and public organizational responses rather than isolated compassionate actions by individuals. (Wilbur, 2006) The institutional setting explored is the university and how a university in the Jesuit tradition might respond compassionately to colleagues in times of crisis.
Introduction

In recent studies compassionate actions taken on behalf of employees in times of personal crisis are a critical litmus test of an authentic spiritual corporate culture. (Delbecq, 2010; Trott, 2008, Frost, Dutton, Matlitis, Jacoba, Lilius, Kanov & Worline, 2006) This is hardly surprising since compassion is an essential spiritual expression across the great traditions. (Amstrong, 1994; Smith, 1991) Here the focus is on normative and public organizational responses rather than isolated compassionate actions by individuals. (Wilbur, 2006) The institutional setting explored is the university.

The inspiration for pursuing the topic is threefold. 1) There is the research cited above regarding organizational response as a critical element of an enacted culture encompassing spirituality. 2) Compassion has also been set forth within the current management literature as a salient variable. (Hazen, 2008, Frost et. al, 2006) Indeed, compassion was named as a theme for the annual 2010 Academy of Management Conference. 3) On a more personal note, the formal vision statement of my own University states: “Santa Clara University will educate citizens and leaders of competence, conscience, and compassion to foster a more humane, just, and sustainable world.” Yet in discussions within an interdisciplinary and inter-college faculty panel there was little evidence of prior agreement regarding normative organizational actions that should be associated with compassion.

This is an explorative and speculative essay. It builds on conversations from three sources. First, a twelve member interdisciplinary faculty panel from my own university was asked to pool judgments regarding possible forms of institutional compassion utilizing a structured Nominal Group Process for creative generation of ideas. (Delbecq, Van de Ven and Gustafson, 1974) Second, a dialog on the subject was facilitated with thirty five faculty attending the 2009 Organizational Behavior Teaching Society annual meeting in Charleston SC. (Delbecq and Gillespie, 2009) Finally, experiences will be shared from a continuing Faculty Leadership Forum that meets monthly at Santa Clara University. (Delbecq, 2003) What follows is my own synthesis from these conversations refracted through a personal reading of current social science literature.

Compassion Matters

Compassion is a salient concern for faculty informants. The Faculty Leadership Forum at Santa Clara brings together two groups of twelve faculty each month of the academic year to examine the calling of the scholar/teacher within the context of our institutional values and mission. The topics and readings initially dealt with support and challenges regarding professional issues surrounding teaching, research and institutional service. To
the surprise of the conveners, once trust and confidentiality was established, work-life stressors emerged as a prominent theme impacting scholar/teachers. It was not simply role conflicts or time management issues that emerged. Rather, it was the sharing of deep personal suffering.

One of the unspoken realities of life in organizations is that people suffer. (Frost et al., p.843)

For example, issues associated with aging and death was often brought forth. These included challenges of elder care as well as dealing with grief when parents, loved ones and colleagues died.

“Dramatic aging of domestic and international work forces attributable in increases in life expectancy, combined with declines in early retirement and birth rates means that the aging of the workforce is one of the most critical theoretical and practical issues organizations face today” (Greller and Simpson, 1999; Hansson, De Koekkoek, Neece and Patterson, 1997; Kanfer and Ackerman, 2004; Warr, 2001)

Costs associated with death and grieving are estimated to exceed 75 million dollars per year. (Grief recovery Institute, 2009).

However, many other forms of personal, child rearing and family suffering were identified. A telling experiential exercise spontaneously arose within one Forum. A member would verbally name a form of suffering, (e.g. chronic illness or pain, addiction, conflicts with the criminal justice system, broken relationships, near death or recent death, etc.), and ask colleagues to indicate by a show of hands whether this form of suffering was present in their family or close friendship network. Multiple hands were raised associated with every form of suffering that was named. Not surprisingly, participants representing every career stage increasingly wanted to include shared discernment regarding how to cope with these challenges.

There was similar interest in the other two data gathering settings. Yet among the Forum members, the faculty panel convened for the Nominal Group exercise, and faculty participants at the Organization Behavior Teaching Society there was no recollection of any prior discussion of how compassion should be expressed normatively and organizationally within their universities. That this should be the case was even more telling as the majority of those involved in each of the three settings included faculty leaders who were serving or had served in administrative positions (e.g. center directors, department chairs, office of the dean, etc.).

An absence of organizational norms seen against the intense resonance with the topic once it is raised suggests that the subject of how a university as an organization can respond to the suffering of its faculty is timely. (It should be noted that the focus in this essay is compassionate response to faculty colleagues. By contrast, there seems to be a better-developed understanding in place regarding how to respond to students in crisis.)
The Crisis/Suffering Syndrome

Here are mentioned just a few descriptors of how suffering is experienced since the focus in this essay is on actions to be taken rather than the syndrome that crisis evokes along with its attendant suffering. When providing a narrative of a personal crisis participants typically reported intense emotional feelings such as anger, guilt or helplessness; increasing difficulty focusing on professional activities because of a preoccupation with and thoughts surrounding the crisis; inability to continue normal routines (both professional and familial); exhaustion and often depression. No matter what the source, suffering clearly disrupted normal functioning.

Still, there was not a single report from a faculty member across my sample of informants of any university agent self-initiating an offer of support. Where support was expressed, it tended to be the random actions of individuals and for the most part consisted of brief consoling off-line remarks. Indeed, silence regarding the crisis being dealt with was the most common experience reported. On the other hand, individuals frequently stated they received explicit or implicit cues demanding that they “catch-up” on delayed commitments “stay-up” with the normal work flow, and “get-over” their personal distraction from work priorities.

In this milieu, distressed faculty members are generally hesitant to even admit that they are experiencing difficulties. There is a norm of superstitious optimism - you shouldn’t have difficulties that impact on your work. As a result, very few informants sought to explore organizational policies that might be remedial in times of crisis with academic administrators or human resource personnel. During their immersion into suffering informants indicated they were/had been unthinking and uncreative regarding what sort of assistance to even ask for as well as unknowing regarding what assistance might be available as part of official policies. In short, suffering was seen as a faculty member’s solitary burden.

What Causes This Lack of Response?

Again, since our purpose is to explore possible organizational responses, discussion of why there is a minimalist response from faculty colleagues and university administrators will be brief.

One informant expressed the reason for hesitation to seek assistance as follows: “Faculty live in their heads and only bring their heads to campus.” Unlike other social settings
(e.g. church, family, friendship networks) where one’s more integrated life is shared, the culture of a university is more restrictively focused on intellectual matters. Therefore, there is a lack of precedents for intimate personal sharing.

Others indicated many colleagues seemed to prefer to keep their personal life “off campus”.

Employees differ in their boundary preferences: “integrators prefer to blur the boundary between work and other life domains, whereas “segmenters” prefer to separate work from other domains of life.” (Edwards and Rothbard, 1999) For “segmenters” work may provide a respite from external crises. Colleagues are hesitant to approach the topic for fear of being intrusive.

Likewise, some individuals prefer to express pro-social behavior in generative activities outside the domain of work. They do not see the university as the setting for engaging in compassionate behavior. (McCadams and de St. Aubin, 1992)

A large number of faculty are introverts and their work day is focused on individual scholarly endeavors rather than shared interactive tasks. Geographic dispersion and difficult commutes amplify this isolation in university communities located in urban settings.

Whatever the reasons, the majority of the faculty informants stated: “we just avoid addressing personal suffering hoping that maybe others will become involved.”

Individuals differ in emotional intelligence and personal skills in expressing compassion. This ability also differs by age. For some, entering into the arena of compassionate response is difficult territory and can result in anxiety, fear and dread that the same suffering may enter their own life. (Erikson, 1963; McAdams, Aubin, E. & Logan, 1982; Stewart and Ostrove, 1998; Grant and Wade-Benzi, 2009)

To conclude, there is an awkward standoff. The individual faculty member in crisis fears a loss of respect and occupational legitimacy if she/he goes public with suffering. Colleagues are hesitant to approach the sufferer both out of fear of being intrusive and because of personal anxiety. Unintended consequences unfold, both losses of productivity and increased personal misery. How can we begin to untie this “Gordian Knot”?

Suggested Normative Organizational Actions

Faculty from the three informant groups had useful and specific suggestions regarding normative actions they wished to see institutionalized within their university communities in response to crisis and suffering.

Increase Awareness:
Since the present culture within their institutions leads to suffering being hidden, faculty agreed that the first norm for creating an organizational response should be sharing awareness or signaling when one learns a colleague is experiencing serious difficulties. Although in a “perfect world” it might be hoped that any colleague who is alerted to the suffering of another be capable of deep and compassionate listening, it was felt that such an expectation was unrealistic.

Seeing compassion as interpersonal work highlights the competence or skillful action involved in doing compassion. It requires not only skillful action but also emotional attunement. (Frost, et al, 2006 p. 850)

Therefore, a minimal normative expectation is that when a faculty colleagues learns of a crisis situation permission will be asked to inform the department chair. When informed, the chair can choose several courses of action. The chair might undertake a listening conversation personally. Alternatively, the chair might ask a wise and skilled colleague (who might be a personal friend of the individual in crisis) to undertake the interpersonal work of coming to a better understanding of the suffering situation and explore resources that might be helpful. In another instance the chair might make a referral to a human resource professional.

There was strong agreement that both this sharing of information and the consequent investigation be normative unless the individual experiencing difficulties requests confidentiality. Even those faculty who described themselves as “segmenters” admitted that however much in the past they had been very “private” and hesitant to share personal and family matters, in times of crisis they welcomed some expression of organizational concern. The consensus was that a minimal risk of perceived intrusiveness by asking permission to share information with the department chairman was far more desirable than to error through silence and lack of response.

Alert Colleagues in Crisis Regarding Formal Resources

The common situation among faculty informants was expressed ignorance regarding formal institutional policies such as family and compassionate leaves (let alone supportive community resources) that might be within the response repertoire of their institutions. Further, in the one or two instances where such resources had been explored, investigation was only undertaken as a result of the prompting of administrators or colleagues. Offering an action as simple as “I will be glad to make a telephone call for you…” was seen as an important organizational action step. The lesson was clear. Informants felt that academic administrators needed to be proactive in bringing information regarding organizational policies and resources available in times of crisis before a faculty member experiencing difficulties. Otherwise, silently bearing the difficulty without assistance tends to be the informal norm.

Actions of leaders offer important symbolic endorsement of what is appropriate or inappropriate. (Pfeffer 1981, Kouzes and Posner, 1993)
**Exploring Informal Arrangements for Assistance**

Still, faculty shared that what is often needed is not so much major institutional responses (e.g. medical or mental health benefits, formal leaves or extension of the tenure calendar) but rather more modest adjustments and short-term help. Again they reported that in times of crisis they have been hesitant to suggest and even unimagination in thinking of forms of such assistance because of preoccupation with and depression during suffering. Further, given the blurring of boundaries between work and family in the modern electronically linked world, some forms of assistance that are most helpful are familial rather than institutional.

The workplace is no longer necessarily a discrete physical location, a circumstance suggesting a need for understanding more complex work-home interactions.

Work Home boundary tactics (Behavioral) assistance from other people, leveraging technology, prioritizing what is urgent, choosing rules of permeability between work and home; (temporal) removing oneself from work demands physically, manipulating physical space, managing physical artifacts; (communication tactics) setting expectations, confronting violator. (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2009)

Here are some examples the faculty informants offered regarding creative actions that could be undertaken to help a colleague in times of crisis:

**Professional/Institutional Assistance**

- Multiple colleagues taking over classes for a short time; e.g. on certain days when medical treatments needed to be undertaken.
- Substituting on committees or service assignments for an interim period.
- Offering to co-author; this collaboration allowing the colleague in difficulty to meet a publication deadline.
- Shifting course sections to make scheduling easier during a crisis period.
- Assuming advising responsibility during a pre-registration period.
- Allowing for “virtual” presence in meetings.

**Familial Assistance**

- Play dates and outings with children of the colleague having difficulty.
- Shopping and provisioning for a family during a death watch.
Providing an automobile to a colleague who normally used public transportation allowing trips to a distant VA center.

Arranging for an R and R get away for someone in an intense care-giving situation.

Managing the information flow through e-mail to friends and colleagues regarding a crisis, and helping to protect individuals from disruptive inquiries.

Forming a “response team” to creatively exchange ideas and coordinate resources.

Nor should traditional forms of compassionate expression be forgotten. Informants often spoke with emotion when remembering flowers, sympathy letters, the promise of prayers, and the presence of colleagues at funeral and memorial services.

Obviously what is needed differs individual-by-individual and situation-by-situation. Often some degree of coordination is necessary, and coordination is not a task the individual caught up in suffering can self-provide. Further, one must always abide by appropriate boundaries and limits. Colleagues are not crisis intervention professionals. Confidentiality and the wishes of the individual experiencing the suffering must always be respected.

In the end the central proposition regarding the position that emerged in discussion with these informants can be summarized in this statement:

What we owe all the time is respectful listening, finding what is wanted from us and engaging in discovery of forms of assistance that are not at first obvious.

Conclusions

This essay has undertaken an exploration of how an organization (in this case a university) might respond to a colleague facing crisis and suffering. In the spiritual traditions, individuals in need should not be left isolated. When we are seeking to understand the expression of spirituality at the organizational level of analysis developing an understanding of normative responses that should be built into the culture of an institution is necessary.

This pilot exploration within the context of University life suggests that there are powerful forces presently hindering organizational responses including a culture that is sometimes restrictively cerebral, fear and anxiety that are provoked when opening to the suffering or others, a lack of skills in knowing how to respond, and fears of being intrusive. Avoidance becomes the default response unless alternative social norms are in place.
In dialog with faculty in three pilot settings, all who had experienced personal crises hoped for a more supportive and compassionate response than was ordinarily manifested within their institutions. This essay suggests that norms that support sharing awareness, action by academic administrators, deep listening and creative exploration of forms of possible assistance, putting individual in touch with formal resources, and collegial collaboration in informal assistance would be important steps in reifying the compassion that is often spoken of but that may remain latent within our present university communities.

Research suggests that there will be more to learn. What are the limits of organizational compassion when balanced against performance needs? Can unequal responses create envy or resentment? How long can compassionate efforts be sustained without burnout or compassion fatigue? Are there cultural differences that must be understood in a pluralistic work force? (Frost et. al. 2006) These and other issues will require organizational learning over time. But at the moment, “action learning” would seem to be the priority. This pilot exploration suggests that in most universities we are a long ways from testing the boundary limits regarding expression of organizational compassion.

References


