



## BOOK REVIEW

# AWAKENING COMPASSION AT WORK: THE QUIET POWER THAT ELEVATES PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

*Awakening Compassion at Work: The Quiet Power That Elevates People and Organizations* by Monica C. Worline and Jane E. Dutton is incredibly relevant for a time such as this. The simultaneous national traumas of COVID-19 and continued systemic racial injustice during 2020 have amplified issues of pain and suffering that already existed in our culture and institutions. The timing of this publication is apt, though it was completed before we knew of a coming pandemic. Such relevance makes it doubly powerful, as Worline and Dutton (2017) speak to the suffering we are currently experiencing. Still, their work was just as relevant before the pandemic and will continue to guide us in the future.

This book acknowledges and substantiates the suffering that exists in the workplace. Suffering is understood as mental, physical, or emotional distress or hardship. The authors add that “suffering is an experience that threatens our sense of holistic integrity and existence” (Worline and Dutton, 2017, p.36) The 2020 crises have increased suffering in our lives, including in our work environments. As campus activities professionals, we have experienced significant shifts in how we do work and deliver services to students. While these crises create opportunities for innovation and creativity, the constant adaptation, ambiguity, and unpredictability cause suffering. This book is poignant because it engages the suffering that exists in the workplace, whether or not we are experiencing a pandemic. Worline and Dutton (2017) impress that we cannot give our full selves to our work when we as individuals, teams, and universities do not acknowledge the toll suffering takes on us personally and professionally.

Worline and Dutton (2017) propose that our dominant organizational systems—the structures, people, culture, and processes of an organization, often ignore suffering in the workplace. The authors robustly exemplify the criticality for us, our supervisors, and our institutional leadership to understand and acknowledge suffering at work. They emphasize compassion as the key to healing the suffering we experience at, and because of work. The need for compassion has been amplified during our current crises and is critical for the tumultuous remainder of 2020 on our campuses.

As you read this review, know that *Awakening Compassion at Work* was not explicitly written for higher education professionals. Instead, it was written for people who think about and study organizational systems in more traditional business contexts. The authors are university academics who understand higher education culture, and their experiences directly translate to university organizational systems. The connection between this book and our work is highly relevant. As professionals who are deeply invested in the importance of campus activities

in relation to student development, it is evident that compassion in the workplace creates an atmosphere where staff experience a sense of well-being that invites students to flourish as well. Along with the pandemic and systemic racial injustice, we know that our students also experience suffering through transitioning to college, experiencing mental health issues, uncertainty about their futures, homesickness, roommate issues, and the like. As Worline and Dutton (2017) demonstrate, when organizational systems are intentional about their compassion competence, compassion likely becomes a cultural norm contributing to our own and our students' overall well-being, regardless of the 2020 crises.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Drs. Monica C. Worline and Jane E. Dutton are preeminent scholars in compassionate organizational systems. Worline and Dutton have been researching compassion in work organizations since 2000. Worline is the Executive Director of the CompassionLab, a researcher at Stanford University's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, affiliate faculty at the Center for Positive Organizations at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, and President of Vervago, Inc. Dutton is currently a distinguished professor of Business Administration and Psychology at the University of Michigan. She is also one of several organizational scholars in a collective of scholars called the CompassionLab.

## SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

*Awakening Compassion at Work* is one of few publications that aggregates the existing body of compassion science research to specifically address the necessity of compassionate organizational systems, while also providing blueprints for this fledgling effort. The concepts and examples in the book effectively inform how to implement compassion in daily work with our colleagues and students. The research also provides guidance for infusing compassion competence into higher education organizational systems, including campus activities departments.

In the foreword of *Awakening Compassion at Work*, guest contributor Raj Sisodia, founder of Conscious Capitalism, powerfully sets the stage for the problem in our organizational systems: the dominant business culture has become “dehumanized and impersonal” (Sisodia, 2017, ix), characterized by a limited version of the human experience that is not sustainable for human flourishing. Our organizational systems have a history of valuing “domination, aggression, ambition, competition, winning at all costs, short term thinking, and a zero-sum view of the world” (Sisodia, 2017, xii). The dominant and traditional approach to work stifles our capacities and causes great suffering. Less than 30% of people in the US are engaged at work, heart attack rates are highest on Monday mornings, and most of us will spend at least 100,000 hours of our lives at work. Many people want to find meaning in their work and are intelligent and capable of contributing the best of themselves in their professions. However, our pervasive avoidance of suffering suppresses this possibility. Our organizational systems need revision to address and decrease suffering so we can release our capabilities in our roles.

While the foreword introduces the context and problem of suffering in the workplace, Worline and Dutton (2017) present compassion as the solution for healing as the premise of their book. Recognizing suffering and responding to alleviate it is the definition of compassion (Goetz et al., 2010). When we experience compassion through our organizational systems, we are bolstered to foster compassionate environments for our students as well. Subsequently, the students we supervise, mentor, teach, and interact with experience a compassionate culture that allows their development to thrive.

Worline and Dutton (2017) guide readers through the meaning of compassionate workplaces and how to create them. They demonstrate how compassion frees our capabilities, which is fulfilling for us as campus activities professionals, makes organizations fiscally and socially better, and can translate to healthy campus contexts for our students. This is perennially important and carries special significance in 2020 as we navigate extraordinary times.

## SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

Grounded in two decades of compassionate organizational research and three decades of compassion science research, the concept of infusing compassionate practices into our traditional approach to working challenges the *modus operandi* of dominant business culture. Though this book is focused on business culture, which can be perceived as quite different than campus cultures, our colleges and universities are not exempt. One of the central philosophical issues in higher education today is that we have embedded and prioritized business culture values into our universities' organizational systems, which ripple through our institutions at every level (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). These values can be problematic when higher education divisions, departments, and campus activities professionals apply norms and standards that prioritize business culture values in a context that intrinsically emphasizes staff and student growth instead of transactional experiences only. Therefore, campus activities staff will benefit from *Awakening Compassion in the Workplace*.

In the book, Worline and Dutton (2017) presented research and practices exemplifying “how to build a capacity for compassion into the structures and practices of an organization” (back cover), and why this is important for human flourishing at work and for our students. They organized their research and suggestions for creating compassionate organizations into four key areas: Defining compassion and why it is essential at work; understanding personal and interpersonal compassion at work; building competent, compassionate organizational systems; and implementing compassionate practices.

The first section of this book described what compassion is and why it is essential at work. Worline and Dutton (2017) stated that compassion is a “felt and enacted desire to alleviate suffering” (p. 5). Compassion is unique because it holds both the dark and light of the human experience, suffering, and the relief of suffering. It is rooted in, but different from empathy. Empathy is an ability to relate with a variety of human emotions such as happiness, kindness, anger, sadness, and more. Compassion is specific to suffering and inspires a biological human need to alleviate it: it is a movement from awareness to action. Compassion is as natural to human survival as self-interest. This is important to note because much of our historical organizational culture is based on values related to self-interest and have neglected compassion, at the cost of curbing our full humanity, stifling our potential in our work environments. Understanding what compassion is and how it operates is the first step for integrating this concept into organizational systems

In the second section of the book, Worline and Dutton (2017) articulated that since we spend so much of our lives at work, it is implausible to think that suffering in our personal lives does not come to work with us. Worline and Dutton (2017) stated that “suffering at work is a hidden cost to human capability, and for too long, we have ignored that most human experience” (p. 2). Frequently suffering has been silenced or unacknowledged at work, even while we might feel devalued or disengaged, perhaps doing work that does not maximize our capabilities, or are negatively impacted by change, maybe dealing with heavy workloads, or suffering from policies that cause us difficulties. This suffering has been exacerbated for many during 2020, as we are experiencing fear, ambiguity, constant change, and quick adaptations at work. Simply acknowledging our personal suffering is an act of compassion in and of itself, and acknowledging suffering is crucial for us to maintain compassionate cultures for our students.

Consider that campus activities are rooted in in-person experiences and bringing large groups of students together. As we and our students navigate a steep learning curve for delivering services virtually or in hybrid form during a pandemic, our pain and frustration need compassionate attention.

In addition to personal suffering, Worline and Dutton (2017) recognized the complexity of interpersonal compassion expressed at work. As humans, we have suppressed this aspect of ourselves for the entirety of our history. Though it is natural, many of us need to learn how to enhance our compassionate awareness and use it appropriately with our colleagues and students. Worline and Dutton (2017) discussed how we can learn to notice when the people around us are suffering, interpret their pain, and respond to it effectively. They also emphasized that compassionate responses might not always be warm and fuzzy. In fact, at its fullest, compassion holds people accountable and sets a foundation for humanely managing conflict. One of the principles suggested throughout the

book speaks to professional accountability: “Institute routines for discussing errors, failures, mistakes, and near misses in your organization in ways that foster generous interpretations of suffering to reduce blame and emphasize learning” (p. 147). Compassionate actions toward our colleagues and students are integral for accountability, especially when we miss the mark, make mistakes, or misunderstand each other. During the 2020 crises, we are more likely to learn and grow from mistakes and failures if we can address them through compassion.

Not only did Worline and Dutton (2017) address compassion at the personal and interpersonal levels, they also demonstrated the importance of designing competent, compassionate organizational systems. Such design goes beyond individual responses to suffering and expands them into the fabric of organizational systems, “focusing on how whole organizations respond” (Worline and Dutton, 2017, p. 93). A poignant observation was that creating compassionate systems is both organic and emergent, generated by people at any level of the organization. They noted that organic emergence allows for varieties of compassionate actions to arise, creating response patterns that generate resources to alleviate suffering throughout the organization. This is important because compassion competence does not solely rely on CEOs or presidents.

While compassionate practices can be emergent and organic, Worline and Dutton (2017) directly addressed the importance that leaders play in creating compassionate systems. This brief, but important acknowledgment, recognized how we, especially in times of suffering, look to leaders in positions of power as models for awakening compassion in our workplaces. Interestingly, the more powerful a leader becomes, or the higher the status they hold, the less attention they pay to the full humanity of others. Data shows that about 88% of the American workforce “goes home every day feeling that they work for an organization that doesn’t listen or care about them” (Worline and Dutton, 2017, p.172). The authors urged leaders in power to remain present and engaged with suffering to amplify compassionate competence in the workplace. Designing compassionate organizational systems during ‘normal’ circumstances is foundational for leading during crises:

We learn what leaders and organizations really value when pressure and unpredictability collide. In crises, leaders, like all humans, tend to fall back on the patterns and actions that they have used in the past (Worline and Dutton, 2017, 182).

When leaders model compassion as a perennial systemic norm, compassion competence will shine through during crises.

In the last quarter of the book, Worline and Dutton (2017) incorporated specific examples of businesses that have integrated compassionate competence into their organizational systems. Since compassion in organizational systems is a relatively new concept, their practical examples provided ideas for how we might individually and collectively design compassionate workplaces within our institutions and departments. They included worksheets, outlines, and reflective activities to foster compassionate competence in any workplace. These resources are highly useful for designing compassion competence plans for campus activities.

Worline and Dutton (2017) concluded the book by reemphasizing, and spurring readers to the criticality of compassion, “so the challenge is no longer to find good reason that compassion matters for business. The challenge is now to heed the call to design work and workplaces that awaken compassion” (p. 224).

## STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

*Awakening Compassion at Work* is a clarion call for compassion fluency in 2020 as we navigate unparalleled circumstances for campus activities. The ultimate strength of this book is that it brings to our collective attention the suffering that exists in our workplaces, then calls us to respond with compassion. This is a relatively new field of study that affirms human qualities and characteristics that have been traditionally sidelined at work but are proven to be powerful for releasing human capability. The authors validate our full humanity and demonstrate the necessity of compassion to allow us to flourish at work. Examples of designing compassionate systems and blueprints for translating research to practice can make these ideas a reality for campus activities contexts.

I would have preferred to see more emphasis on the role of leaders in positions of power play in modeling compassion. The authors briefly addressed this concept, but increased attention to this notion could implore fully human expressions of leadership. The very concept of this book revises what power and leadership mean, expanding our understanding of power to include things like “relationships, nurturing, compassion, vulnerability, caring, and cooperation” (Sisodia, 2017, xii). Redefining power has the potential to increase compassionate competence in the workplace. This is especially compatible in higher education because our institutions exist for more than a bottom line and are likely more open to this transformational approach. Students perceive any university representative, including campus activities professionals, to possess power. These perceptions are notable because, as we supervise and mentor students, they look to us as examples of effective leadership.

Creating compassionate organizational systems, including in campus activities contexts, can be messy work. It is not part of our traditional framework, and in most cases, requires us to imagine a revised version of our organizational systems and daily work. Further research and experimentation in higher education and campus activities would illuminate how university organizational systems directly influence the fullest expression of our capabilities at work, subsequently enhancing the student development experience.

## CONCLUSION

As many of us have returned to campus, work virtually, or exist in some type of hybrid model in 2020, we will undeniably recognize the necessity of creating compassionate work environments. The effects of the pandemic, systemic racial injustice, and many other forms of suffering will remain with us. Campus activities teams can experiment with compassion competence in simple ways, such as acknowledging pandemic woes and providing safe spaces to discuss racial injustice with our teams. Empathizing with our colleagues and students regarding major adaptations in how we plan and deliver campus events is another way to demonstrate compassion immediately. We can also plan to infuse pervasive compassionate responses by creating routine ways to address personal or systemic sources of suffering, including practices to alleviate suffering. *Awakening Compassion at Work* invites us to the possibility of manifesting our full humanity at work. In doing so, we can release our best capabilities and impart compassion to our colleagues and students for their flourishing within and beyond the university.

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