

Nourish to Flourish

Nourish to Flourish brings together practitioners' voices and creative practices, and wide-ranging reviews of books that support strengths-based approaches to human interactions.

Book Appreciation



Neena Verma

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Awakening Compassion at Work – The Quiet Power That Elevates People and Organizations

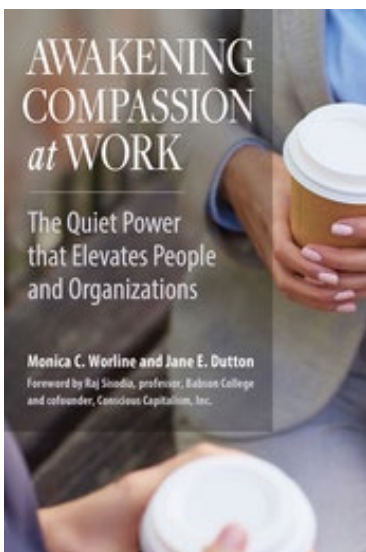
By **Monica C. Worline and Jane E. Dutton**

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017

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I would rather make mistakes in kindness and compassion than work miracles in unkindness and hardness

Mother Teresa



From the soulful poetry of Rumi, to the existential prose of Nietzsche, from the Dalai Lama's joyful invocations to just about any human being, I am always seeking inspiration and guidance to learn, embody and practice compassion. That said, on the practical (not my strength) grounds of the organizational realm, I sometimes find myself struggling because my compassionate endeavour is influenced by what Mother Teresa says – unwavering if naïve – yet always so deeply fulfilling and humbling.

In their one-page introduction, the authors set the tone of their deep and powerful work by making a simple assertion – ‘suffering at work is a hidden cost to human capability’.

The authors walk you through a gamut of organizational contexts where compassion enables a sense of human aliveness, such as innovation, collaboration, talent, learning, quality, engagement.

An emotion, or value or act, whatever one’s comprehension of this phenomenon, compassion is a fundamental human reality, as much as suffering. But do we talk of the two in the cold, professional, organizational realm of business mandates and performance agendas? The atmosphere just does not seem conducive. One doesn’t talk of suffering at workplace, more so if it relates to personal life – illnesses, losses, traumas, relationship breakdowns, and definitely not grief. But what of the hurts and suffering one collects at workplace? We don’t talk of that either. We are expected to be stoic, professional and to “act strong”. Maybe sometimes we shouldn’t. We are expected not to “act weak” by allowing any expression to our suffering. Maybe sometimes we should, because vulnerability is not the opposite of strength. Often an authentic expression of vulnerability allows unfolding of real strength.

It was thus with such faith that compassion has a sure and sacred space in organizational realm, that I was searching for a book on compassion at work that would combine scholarly rigour with practical knowledge. And I found this amazing one by co-authors Worline and Dutton.

What an ‘AWAKENING’ Title

What does a courageous book with an evocative title like this do? It invokes and awakens.

In their one-page introduction, the authors set the tone of their deep and powerful work by making a simple assertion – “suffering at work is a hidden cost to human capability” – and that to work with “full human effectiveness” organizations need to “awaken compassion at work”. Simple but not simplistic. It must have been a challenging task for authors to make a case for compassion in the organizational context. It seems apt thus that they begin by presenting the so-to-say abstract phenomenon as a four-part concrete process of – noticing the presence of suffering at workplace, interpreting and making sense of the experience, feeling empathic concern and acting to alleviate suffering.

The authors call for a break in the silence around suffering at work before explaining the why and the how of compassion at work. Making a compelling case for the strategic advantage of compassion at work, the authors walk you through a gamut of organizational contexts where compassion enables a sense of human aliveness, such as innovation, collaboration, talent, learning, quality, engagement. The explanations make a logical appeal, but it is a simple affirmation – “human ingenuity” that organizations need to enable various things, asks for acknowledgment of “human pain” – that calls you to the deeper layers of the book.

Interpreting or making sense, in authors' view, is about making generous interpretations about others' suffering.

At its heart

The four-aspect phenomenon of compassion at work is what sits at the core of this book. The process begins with noticing – a deep act and a process of inquiry, an essential “portal to compassion”, but hard to practice. There are subtle clues to be discerned and acknowledged, for which a supportive organizational climate is just as essential as individual members’ perceptiveness. Clues that need to be recognized, brought out of the closet, allowed space and expression, and made sense of. The authors share a stirring “Found Poem” that they have composed from the interviewees’ description of compassion at work, uncovering assumptions about suffering at work ...

*There was a real norm in our department of modesty and
always presenting a good face.
Keep your skeletons at home.
You're not supposed to have a personal life.
You are supposed to take care of business.*

Interpreting or making sense, in authors' view, is about making generous interpretations about others' suffering – about “withholding blame” that other people’s suffering is of their own doing, about offering space with “dignity and worth” for alleviation of their pain, and about coming with presence – just “being there” if nothing else. Interpreting calls for the “positive default assumption” that people are basically good, whole and worthy of compassion. The authors call you to maintain “fierce compassion”, an unwavering commitment to making generous interpretations, so as to be able to take the path of empathy.

Feeling empathic concern, the authors contend, is a choice – a conscious act of perceptive engagement, attunement into other’s world of pain while still maintaining one’s own capacity for empathic listening with mindfulness. And then comes the part that sets this book apart – “compassion moves”, the real-time improvisational acts that enable alleviation of suffering.

For organizations to awaken compassion at a systemic level, they must shape compassion competence as a collective emergent pattern.

There is no naïve assertion that these compassionate actions are without existential dilemmas. There are downsizings and lay-offs that organizations must hand down with stoic professionalism. And there are dark underbellies of organizations where the unnoticed employees who sweep, make copies and do other such menial jobs, quietly keep an organization well-oiled. What about noticing the suffering they silently endure and rise above to keep serving the organization, whether or not any one stops for a moment, exchanges greetings, gives them a warm look that says they matter and asks “Is everything OK”? The

The authors outline factors like speed, timing, immediacy, breadth and the magnitude of customized resources as contributive towards compassion competence.

acts of compassion must extend to this invisible, steadfast human force at work, if an organization is sincere in its intent to awaken compassion at work. This is what makes the authors assert that “compassion competence” is must.

The architecture of compassion

For organizations to awaken compassion at a systemic level, they must shape compassion competence as a collective emergent pattern of noticing, interpreting, feeling and acting that leverages positive deviances and spreads like a positive contagion. The authors outline factors like speed, timing, immediacy, breadth and the magnitude of customized resources as contributive towards compassion competence.

They explain the what and the how of the social architecture of compassion – the structures, the processes, the human networks – that must come into place to enable compassionate actions. They elucidate the power of organizational culture to clarify, declare and foster humanistic values, and of organizational designs to enable greater compassion competence. Not one, two, three or ten – there area as many as twenty-eight (I hope I counted right) design principles to enable compassion competence across a wide spectrum of organizational life.

The authors help leaders interested in cultivating compassion competence with a skill set for generic scenarios, and some nuanced capabilities for leading with compassion in crisis situations. The authors culminate their offer with a grounded explanation of what comes in the way of living and enabling compassion in organizational contexts – obstacles of all kinds and levels – of people, leaders, structures, processes and cultures

I must pause here to say that the last section of the book took me most by surprise. I was happy enough to read the authors make a research-based yet realistically convincing case for compassion at work. Part IV of the book is an even richer gift – pragmatic personal and organizational blueprints of compassion. Chapters 11 and 12 are treasure-houses for HR and OD professionals, coaches and just anyone interested in cultivating and enhancing compassion competence at individual and systemic levels. There are assessment scales, design principles, change frameworks and more.

So, what more to awaken?

There is an abundance of case studies and stories, rich with meaning and moral, something that may not be easy to find, articulate or practice in organizational

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realm. The book warms its way to the reader's heart and then convinces the mind that an emotion as deep and layered as "compassion" is for real, even in the unlikely context of workplace. Via a narrative of action words (noticing, interpreting, feeling, acting), the authors inspire compassion pursuit at various levels – from "feeling compassion" to "actioning" it. The active voice of the narrative influences one to move beyond abstractions of compassion towards its tangible practice at work.

In my view, it is neither fair nor feasible to make a critical commentary just so a book review is deemed objective and complete. And I wouldn't do that. That said, I hope to learn from an expanded edition or subsequent work more about how to work with the emergent pattern of collective noticing, interpreting and feeling, and what role systems can/should play to facilitate growth of human capacity to notice suffering, feel compassion and act upon it. Given the times we are living in, not just in organizational context, but also at societal level, it would be an amazing contribution to help human beings and systems learn to collectively notice and make sense of suffering, and extend the emergent pattern of compassionate action from the individual to the systemic level.

I close this book appreciation with one of the many touching compassion invocations that the authors make through the expansive traverse of their work:

*At times when we think there's nothing we can "do"
We can cultivate ability to "be"*

Monica C. Worline (left)

Monica Worline is the founder and CEO of EnlivenWork, an innovation organization that teaches businesses and others how to tap into courageous thinking, compassionate leadership, and the curiosity to bring their best work to life. Monica Worline is a research scientist at Stanford University's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education and Executive Director of CompassionLab, the world's leading research collaboratory focused on compassion at work. She holds a lectureship at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, and is affiliate faculty at the Center for Positive Organizations.

Jane E. Dutton (right)

Robert L. Kahn Distinguished University Professor of Business Administration and Psychology at the Ross School of Business. Jane Dutton is a co-founder of the Center for Positive Organizations and passionate about cultivating human flourishing at work. Her research focuses on compassion, job crafting, high quality connections, and meaning making at work.

<https://awakeningcompassionatwork.com/about/>

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