



Well@Work Podcast

Episode 18: Leadership in Times of Crisis

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode of the podcast, Licensed Clinical Social Worker Cambria Walsh discusses strategies for building leadership skills in times of crisis. And now, Cambria Walsh.

Hello, I am Cambria Walsh, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and member of the University of Kentucky's Secondary Traumatic Stress Innovations and Solutions Center. This podcast focuses on leadership in the time of crisis. Leadership in the time of crisis requires both compassion and wisdom. Compassion is having an understanding of others distress and translating this into action to help alleviate the distress. Compassionate leadership creates stronger connections between people, it increases the level of trust, enhances collaboration, and results in increased loyalty. Research has found that compassionate leaders are perceived as stronger and more competent. Wisdom refers to leadership competence, an understanding of what and how to motivate people and how to manage them to deliver on agreed upon priorities. One of the concerns that often arises when people think about compassionate leadership is that you'll be perceived as "soft" or "too kind" and that it will allow people to walk over you. This is where the wisdom comes in. Compassionate and wise leaders hold themselves and their ethics to high standards, as a compassionate leader you conduct yourself ethically and expect every one of your team members to be the same. You strive for nothing less than excellence. Being compassionate does not mean you cannot hold other people accountable, you have to be clear about expectations and if people are not meeting them, have a compassionate conversation to understand why not.

There are three pillars of compassionate leadership. The first is a cognitive component or "I understand you;" you need to have a solid grasp of the challenges, situations, and decisions each person on your team is facing. The second pillar is an affective component or "I feel for you." It isn't enough to simply have facts; your team members need to know that you are able to feel what they feel and that you understand where they are emotionally. The third pillar is the motivational component or "I want to help you." The people on your team want to know that you want them to succeed and that you are supporting them; it should be clear that both their professional and personal development is part of your agenda. This motivation or supportive component may involve joining with them and thinking about the opportunities for professional growth and skill building, to address the stress, or exploring with them how they're balancing competing demands from other parts of their life outside of work. Behind all three components is a switch from "me" to "we," so that no longer is anyone in a situation alone, you have their back.

As you look at building your leadership skills to encompass compassion and wisdom, there are several critical strategies to consider. The first is engaging in self-compassion. There is no playbook or manual for these times, we're all really learning a lot on the fly and there are constant changes. Really the only certainty is uncertainty. As a compassionate leader, you need to have a self-awareness of how you are being impacted and give yourself some extra breathing room to make mistakes, take time to reflect, and to accept that you do not know how to do everything. Role modeling this to staff is a

wonderful way to support them in self-compassion as well. The second strategy is making sure that you're effectively communicating. In the current crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is the reality of physical distancing which is impacting how we interface with our staff. This may look different depending on whether you have staff working remotely or in the office or a combination of both. But no matter what, the way that we're able to connect has changed dramatically over the past several months. No potlucks, no retreats, and for many no face-to-face interaction with teammates or leadership at all, so it is that much more important to create a safe space to communicate and for communication to be clear. It is okay to say "This is what I know right now and I wish that I had more solid information." Providing up-to-date and consistent communication, with concrete information, balanced with transparency that there's a lot of unpredictability, is key. This involves having a consistent communication plan. It may be helpful to have a unified space for people to seek out information or provide consolidated information and regularly scheduled bulletins, so as to avoid inundating your staff with too many emails. Be sure to avoid conflicting messaging and be available to clarify if there's any confusion.

The third strategy is to hold an awareness that when a crisis occurs, there's a high likelihood that we are all experiencing disruption together. But as with any type of disruptive event, it impacts everyone differently. I've heard a lot of people use the metaphor that we are all in the same boat. I would argue that we are all in different boats, on different parts of the sea. Some people are in much fancier boats, others may be on boats that are not so fancy, but are stable, and still others might be on boats that are barely afloat. Some people are alone, others are with a few people, and some boats are really, really, crowded. The seas that we are on are in a state of flux, one day they may be calm, other days choppy. It's really important to understand what those on your team are experiencing and look at ways to support them and to create safety for people to air their concerns as well. One of the challenges right now is that it's easy to look at someone else's situation and think that it is all unicorns and rainbows; the reality is: that isn't true for anyone right now. Connected with this, is that crises often shine the light on a lot of inequities and challenges, both within organizations and in society; it is really important to have a good read on how these may be impacting your team. Racial and civil unrest, health disproportionality, and the inequalities in income mean that crises impact individuals in different ways. Taking the time to understand individual situations and hearing perspectives is really important, and doing so in ways that are non-judgmental.

All of these factors we just touched upon can often strike the fairness nerve. Another important strategy as leaders is that you need to look at how you connect individually with those on your team and how you create a space for peers to talk about their challenges with each other to help create shared understanding. This means examining how you provide support to individuals in ways that are going to make everyone feel that their needs are being heard. And even if you can't meet everyone's needs, and you probably won't be able to, at least hearing them out and giving them something to feel that they are being heard is critical. As part of this, it's important to create teams that are able to function in compassionate ways. There are a few approaches to do this. Make sure that you have staff at different levels and parts of the organization involved in decisions so that you are getting perspective from different angles. Create guidelines around sharing your experiences without traumatizing others and

without violating confidentiality, so that you can process and get the support you need without harming others. Use low impact debriefing or processing to allow peer support without further traumatizing others. And finally, clarify your role as a leader. Be clear that “I am here to support and provide direction, but when there are conflicts, I’m not going to be the one person solving everyone's problems. So how do we as a team create an environment where people can speak up honestly with each other when things are feeling frustrating?”

One final note, it is important to evaluate your workplace; both the level of supportiveness above you, as well as what you have the ability to change. Stephen Covey's model of looking at what is in your “zone of control,” what's in your “zone of influence,” and what don't you have any control over, is a good framework to consider. Maybe you can't impact on some of the policies, but you can control things like staff check-ins and how you do your supervision. Also, being transparent about what you do and do not have control over. And as always, being self-compassionate. Check out our podcast on the Circle of Concern for more information about how to use this technique in practice. As you consider how to strengthen your own leadership skills and build compassion, I would leave you with one final thought which comes from Karen Davies, who is a leader in the aviation industry, in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic “We will get through this and when we do people will not remember what was done, but how it was done.” For more information, please check out the resources at our website and in the description of the video; and remember to stay well at work

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.