



Career Compass No. 67:

## Effective Leaders Start with Compassion

*by Dr. Frank Benest*

**November 16, 2018**

*Dear Frank,*

*I'm the supervising building inspector. I oversee three other inspectors in a densely populated, diverse, and poorer community of 50,000 residents. I report to the chief building official.*

*Here is the big problem: Our region is experiencing a housing crisis. A lot of working people can't afford to rent an apartment for themselves or their families. Instead, they are renting out garages, sheds, and even tents from homeowners. Many of these structures don't meet building code standards and are, in fact, unsafe to live in. Our inspectors have sometimes discovered 10-15 people living in a garage. We get complaints from neighbors or referrals from police and fire personnel who come across these illegal second units or structures.*

*Once we inspect these structures, our inspectors "red tag" them, giving the property owner 10 days (as required by code) to fix the code problems or requiring the renters to vacate. Some structures need minor improvements (bigger windows, stabilized water heater, door opening outward) and some need major improvements (a foundation or rebar, anchoring of structure, toilets, heating).*



*Property owners and tenants of these units have come out in large numbers to vehemently protest our inspections and corrective notices. Residents living in illegal structures don't want to be thrown out into the streets and property owners say that they can't afford to keep their properties without renting out auxiliary units.*

*The chief building official and I have testified at these raucous hearings that we can't ignore structures that pose a health and safety hazard. The city council is under great political pressure. Many people have urged the council to declare an "amnesty" and basically waive (ignore) the code so they don't go homeless. We inspectors, of course, see the need to uphold our legal and professional responsibilities to ensure public safety. However, we feel caught in the middle and quite perplexed by this challenge.*

*I want to act as a leader and help our organization and the community resolve this issue. Where do I begin? How do I respond with my team to this no-win dilemma?*

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**DR. BENEST:** You are caught in the middle. It's a messy, uncertain, and politically charged situation with no right or wrong answers. I commend you for seeing the need and opportunity to step up as a leader and help address this community challenge. As a starting point, I suggest that you go beyond your narrow legal and professional duties and try to figure out a response by exhibiting compassion.

You need compassion for all parties:

- Renters
- Property owners
- Neighbors
- Elected officials
- Your staff
- Yourself.

Compassion springs from our recognition that suffering is part of the human condition. We must recognize our common humanity if we are to act compassionately.

### **WHAT IS COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP?**

Compassion is seeking to understand what another person is experiencing, feeling for them in a genuine way, and taking action to help them be successful or alleviate their suffering. Compassionate leadership is intent upon seeking and contributing to the wellbeing of others. It is other-centered.

Compassion is not about being a pushover or trying to please everyone. We do what is required of us as professionals, yet we seek ways to respond to the needs of others.

### **WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COMPASSION AND EMPATHY?**

People often confuse compassion with empathy. Empathy is feeling what others feel by putting yourself in their shoes. Empathy may immobilize you so there is no constructive action. Compassion requires that you respond through your action as a leader.

## WHY COMPASSION?

As a leader, you are often confronted with difficult, messy problems. To promote the wellbeing of others, compassion requires that you enter conversations with others, ask questions, listen intently, and then respond even if there is no ideal solution. Conversation creates connection. People won't follow you without connection. (See [Career Compass No. 61: Leadership is the Art of Conversation](#))

By seeking a compassionate response, you show that you care. People will trust you and connect with you if you demonstrate that you care.

## WHAT ARE THE FOUR ELEMENTS LEADERSHIP?

According to Anna Kavar, cofounder of [Leading Through Connection](#), compassionate leadership involves several elements.

Compassionate leaders do four things. As a compassionate leader, you must

1. Figure out your **intention** through self-reflection. Reflect about your values (see [Career Compass No. 57: Leading by Living Our Values](#)), acknowledge any assumptions or biases, and identify your responsibilities as a professional and a leader. To identify your intent, you must carve out time and create space for self-reflection and conversation with those close to you, such as a partner or coach or close colleague.
2. Explore **options** in an imperfect world through conversation. These conversations must involve all the affected stakeholders, including residents living in the illegal units, property owners, neighbors, your inspectors, and top management and elected officials.

For instance, you may conduct one-on-one conversations with inspectors and then, perhaps, several staff meeting discussions. Your inspectors are undoubtedly questioning their role and responsibilities and feeling uncertain, confused, and troubled. Therefore, you must create a safe environment to explore what they are experiencing and what ideas they may have in response to the dilemma.

To generate ideas, you might want to ask some catalytic questions, such as:

- What are we experiencing and feeling?
- What are the hopes, dreams, fears, and concerns of the various groups that we are serving?
- What is our big responsibility?
- What if we do nothing? What are the consequences of our current approach?
- What are some alternative ways or approaches for responding to our big obligations?
- What would be a stretch?
- What could we learn?
- What about. . . ?
- What if. . . ?
- What else?
- What are we missing?
- What can we do together?

These conversations with all the involved parties will yield some viable responses while demonstrating that you care. It is best if you let go of any agenda and allow opinions, feelings, and desires to emerge without rushing to find a solution. By giving space for possibility, you are able to discover more options and signal that you are not there to change minds but to listen. Of course, then you, the building official, the city manager, and ultimately, the council must decide to act.

3. Take **constructive action** after conducting authentic conversations. (See section below for some examples of constructive actions even though there are no perfect solutions.)
4. Assess the **impact** of your action. Debrief your actions with your team. What went well? What did not go so well? What did you all learn for future practice? There will, of course, be missteps, so you need to fix things up as you go along. As Dan Rockwell suggests, learn as you go, not before you go ("[The Six Chapters of Every Leader's Journey](#)", *Leadership Freak* blog, July 22, 2018).

## HOW WOULD COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP HELP ADDRESS YOUR HEALTH AND SAFETY CHALLENGE?

By having conversations with all the parties, you might conclude that several compassionate responses could be pursued. For instance, you might with your team recommend some short- to medium-term actions by the city:

- Differentiate between non-health and safety infractions that are not life-threatening and those that, in fact, pose serious hazards.
- Work with top management and the council to allow 30 days (not just 10 days as stipulated in your current code) for property owners to make the improvements for those structures not posing grave health and safety concerns.
- Partner with the county and nonprofit agencies to relocate families who live in unsafe structures.
- Develop minimum standards for garage conversions and work with property owners to make the conversions safe.
- Prequalify a few contractors to help property owners make the improvements.
- Create an online resource center for displaced families and property owners who are trying to comply.

In respect to mid- to longer-term actions, you might recommend that the city;

- Create a loan or grant program to help property owners make do-able improvements.
- Put auxiliary units on the property tax assessment rolls with new property tax revenues going into the loan or grant fund to replenish the fund.

Of course, the long-term solution is working with public, nonprofit, and private partners to build more low-income housing in the community.

To the extent that these constructive actions help alleviate some suffering, they are compassionate responses. They also require smart risk-taking, such as engaging partners, calling your effort a pilot, tying your programmatic responses to the larger council agenda, using influentials (clergy?) as sponsors, and the like. (See [Career Compass No. 18: Taking Smart Risks.](#))

## WHAT MAY YOU FEAR ABOUT COMPASSION?

As suggested by Roger Schwarz ("[What Stops Leaders from Showing Compassion?](#)", *Harvard Business Review*, Aug 29, 2013), it is common for leaders to feel some trepidation about acting compassionately. As a leader, you may fear that:

- "If I'm compassionate, people will think I agree with them."

You can show compassion even if you disagree with people's ideas or cannot support what they want you to do.

- "I'll be perceived as too nice or soft or pleasing."

You can feel for people's suffering yet still hold them accountable. For example, you must insist that the property owners make the required health and safety improvements, or they cannot rent out auxiliary units.

- "I will be left responsible for solving all the problems."

You can be compassionate as a leader by listening to people, exploring options, and doing what is reasonable and do-able given your legal, professional, and even moral obligations. You are not accepting all the responsibility. Responsibility means the ability to respond. You are responding in the ways that you can.

## WHAT DOES COMPASSION REQUIRE?

Compassion requires **pause** and **reflection**. You must first get a handle on your own emotions and acknowledge your confusion, doubts, and frustrations. And then you must ask yourself, "What am I compelled to do given my compassion for others?"

Compassion also requires **conversation**, **relationship**, and **connection**. Compassion is other-centered and involves getting out of your own bubbles or spheres and exploring the realities of other parties. It's not all about you and your responsibilities and needs. It's also about what others need. You must put aside your ego and focus on the wellbeing of others, all in an environment where there are no perfect solutions.

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*Compassion usually involves some measure of **courage**.*

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You must let down your guard, try to make connection, and then take constructive action, even though there may be disagreement and conflict. Courage is when we fear failure, a lack of acceptance, push-back, or ridicule . . . yet we act anyway (see [Career Compass No. 58: Overcoming Deep-Seated Fears](#)).

Finally, compassion is about **self-compassion**. Compassion must encompass self-compassion. Thus, it is self-interested as well as other-interested. Even as we try to respond to the needs of

others, we as leaders must reflect on what we are experiencing and feeling; what we need; what are our responsibilities to ourselves. For example, what must the Building Division simply not allow in terms of major health and safety hazards even in the face of political pressure for “amnesty”?

So, compassion requires time, patience, kindness, and strength.

## **WHY IS SELF-COMPASSION SO IMPORTANT?**

As you attempt to exert leadership amid all this complexity, you must give yourself a break. As you and your team deal with the challenge of illegal accessory units, you will make mistakes and might even fail. If you are self-compassionate, you don't need to berate ourselves or blame others (the two common reactions to mistakes).

According to Serena Chen (“[Give Yourself a Break: The Power of Self-Compassion](#),” *Harvard Business Review*, Sept-Oct, 2018), people with self-compassion demonstrate three behaviors. First, they are kind rather than judgmental about their own mistakes; second, they acknowledge that setbacks are a shared human experience; and third, they are not overwhelmed by negative emotions when they make a mistake. They feel bad but move forward.

Those with self-compassion typically have a growth mindset. They don't believe that their talents and skills are fixed. Rather, they see mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow.

## **WHAT ARE THE LIKELY OUTCOMES OF COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP?**

Even though your constructive action is not everything any one group wants you to do, compassion demonstrates that you care about others and therefore engenders trust and builds followership and commitment.

Furthermore, if you model compassion, it leads to compassion by others. You begin to build a more compassionate organizational culture which is open to diverse perspectives, different ways of doing things, and learning from mistakes and even failures. Thus, compassionate leadership generates more creative responses by local government.

## **LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT WHO WE ARE**

Leadership is about doing. But it's more than just doing.

Compassionate leadership requires that we

- Reflect upon the needs of all parties including ourselves.
- Engage others, ask questions, and listen.
- Acknowledge the hopes, dreams, interests, fears, and concerns of others.
- Encourage others to share ideas.
- Integrate the ideas of other stakeholders, including staff.
- Take action.
- Invite action by others.
- Let others lead with you.
- Fix things up and learn as we go along.

Compassion requires humility. We need to ask for help and acknowledge that we don't have all the answers. We need to show up to learn, not educate.

To paraphrase Frances Hesselbein, the former CEO of the Girls Scouts of the USA, leadership is about how to be, not just how to do.

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*Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail [careers@icma.org](mailto:careers@icma.org) or contact Frank directly at [frank@frankbenest.com](mailto:frank@frankbenest.com). Read past columns at [icma.org/careercompass](http://icma.org/careercompass).*