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# The Transformative Potential of Compassion at Work

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### **The Transformative Potential of Compassion at Work**

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"Cooperation can only strengthen mankind, because it helps us recognize that the most secure foundation for the new world order is not simply broader political and economic alliances, but rather each individual's genuine practice of love and compassion. For a better, happier, more stable and civilized future, each of us must develop a sincere, warm-hearted feeling of brother- and sisterhood."

~The Dalai Lama~

In the above quote, the Dalai Lama suggests that individuals are the primary architects of human society. He believes that society can be transformed in a positive way through individual expressions of love and compassion. This chapter takes this idea to heart by exploring how seemingly small interpersonal acts can have big system-wide effects. By argument and example<sup>2</sup>, we hope to reveal the ways that daily instances and expressions of compassion among individuals within a social system, particularly work organizations, can contribute to an organization's capability for cooperation (OCC).

By organizational capability for cooperation, we are referring to an organization's collective ability to do cooperation, where capability is defined by both the organization's ability to do more cooperation and its competence in doing it better. Consistent with the

theme of this book, we define cooperation as voluntary acts of working with others for shared advantage (Smith, Carroll, & Ashford, 1995; Wagner, 1995). Our definition follows from research by social dilemma theorists who see cooperation in decisions where joint interest is maximized (Kopelman, Weber & Messick, 2002). The definition goes beyond the idea of cooperation as a simple contribution of effort to the completion of interdependent jobs that has been described by researchers in economics, social psychology, and business in their investigations of phenomena such as social loafing and free riding in groups (Latane, Williams, & Harkins, 1979; Wagner, 1995). Cooperation is often achieved by collaboration, defined as joint decision making by key stakeholders about the future in particular problem domain (Gray, 1989). In accord with the thesis of this book, our argument is that greater levels of organizational and interorganizational capability for cooperation contribute to positive global change and human prosperity (Cooperrider & Dutton, 1999).

An organization's greater capability for cooperation shows up in many ways. It may be manifest in an organization's greater rate and success in partnering, particularly in partnering that is more integrative and mutual (Austin, 2000; Eisler, 2003; McGill, 2003). It may show up in more extensive and effective coordination processes. For example, Gittell (2003) argues that firms vary in their capacity to do complex coordination of interdependent tasks and that greater relational competence is largely responsible for higher coordination effectiveness. In her studies of coordination in both the airline industry and in hospitals, a capacity to coordinate well depends on a willingness and competence in cooperating across diverse and interdependent parts of an organization.

A greater capability for cooperation at the organizational level may also show up in less dramatic and costly ways such as more prosocial behavior between members in the organization (Batson & Shaw, 1991) or greater levels of interpersonal helping (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002). It may also be manifest in the everyday language of organizational members. The language of “we”, of care, of help, and of enabling both reflect and affirm the existence of a higher capability for cooperation and connection more generally (e.g., Dutton, 2003; Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000). It may also be manifest in the everyday conduct of meetings, gatherings, and programs, where an attitude of cooperation permeates these micro-occasions and people both see and act on the potential of mutual gains available from working together for shared goals. Where OCC is greater, there is an increased likelihood that cooperation will occur and there may even be more varied forms of cooperation, and the better the organization will be at enabling and supporting cooperation.

Our aim in this chapter is to develop an understanding of the mechanisms through which compassion among members of an organization generates resources, shared values and beliefs, and skills, all of which help to build the organization’s cooperation capacity.

Resources are the materials in use that facilitate cooperation, or what people draw on and use when they cooperate (Feldman, 2004). Shared values and beliefs provide a sense of direction and motivation. They are what guides cooperation, and help people (both individuals and groups) understand why they should cooperate (i.e., for what purpose) and how they should approach cooperation. Finally, the skills are the means by which people cooperate; they are the know-how that informs how people actually do

cooperation. Taken together, these three effects of compassion contribute to an organization's capability for cooperation. We argue that interpersonal acts of compassion build resources, strengthen values and beliefs and cultivate critical skills, thus building OCC. A visual depiction of the three mechanisms through which compassion affects OCC is presented in Figure 1. We use a pillar metaphor to suggest that an organization's capability for cooperation rests on three pillar features: resources, values and beliefs, and skills.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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### **Starting assumptions about compassion**

This paper begins with the assumption that experiences of pain and compassion are fundamental to being human. As human institutions, organizations are sites that inevitably harbor the emotional pain and suffering of their individual members (Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius & Kanov, 2002; Frost & Robinson, 1999; Frost, Dutton, Worline & Wilson, 2000). Moreover, the presence of pain in work organizations has serious financial, psychological, and social costs for organizations and their members (Frost, 2003). As the "heart's response to suffering" (Kornfield, 1993), compassion plays an important role in organizational life through its ability to lessen and/or alleviate pain. Compassion is a relational process that involves noticing another person's pain, experiencing an emotional reaction to his or her pain, and acting in some way to help ease or alleviate the pain (Kanov, Maitlis, Worline, Dutton, Frost & Lilius, 2004). Consistent with the Buddhist argument, compassion suggests no self as it implies no

boundary between the self and the other (Gray, 2003). Compassion is a form of caregiving that is typically invisible and/or devalued in work organizations (Eisler, 2003; Kahn, 1993). Organizations enable or disable compassion by facilitating or hindering the noticing, feeling, and responding to pain of their members, processes that we argue contribute to the creation of resources, the strengthening of certain shared beliefs and values, and the cultivation of key relational skills (Dutton, Worline, Frost & Lilius, 2005). Our understanding of the healing power of compassion is rooted in medical and nursing literatures, where scholars and practitioners emphasize the importance of attending to patients' emotional anguish as well as the patients' physical health (Cassell, 2002; Reich, 1989). Compassion enables medical practitioners to achieve a deeper level of healing because it connects them more fully with their patients and allows them to treat the whole person rather than just illnesses and injuries (Brody, 1992; Cassell, 2002).

While the healing potential of compassion plays an important role in organizations, compassion also contributes in important ways to organizations' social fabric. By social fabric we mean the overall pattern in the quality of relationships between people in an organization. As suggested in the medical and nursing literatures, compassion heals by and through the relationship that it helps to create between health care providers and their patients (Reich, 1989). Historical, philosophical, and theological sources also recognize the ability of compassion to create, strengthen, and sustain human connection and community (Clark, 1997; Dalai Lama, 1995; Glaser, 2005; Wuthnow, 1990). In general, compassion is widely regarded as a basic social force that builds and reinforces connections between people.

In the context of work organizations, we argue that compassion has particularly important social and relational effects. Namely, compassion among organizational members builds, strengthens, and sustains the cooperation capability of organizations. While we discuss the cooperation capability as building from within organizations, consistent with theme of this book, we see it as critical in order to create the conditions by which organizations can be a powerful force for change in a broader sense (Harman, 1990). We now turn our attention to the mechanisms through which compassion achieves these ends.

The core claim for our chapter is that small acts of compassion are generative – they produce vital and renewable resources, generate and strengthen critical values and beliefs, and develop critical relational skills. We illustrate these claims with stories we have gathered from two studies of experienced compassion at work. Together, these three products cultivate an organizational social fabric that strengthens an organization’s cooperation capability both by improving the collective competence of the whole and increasing the load capacity of the whole for doing cooperative work. We develop arguments below. After building this foundation we briefly describe a process through which this cooperation capability is enacted.

### **Three Pillars in Building the Compassion to Cooperation Link**

#### **Compassion creates resources**

Compassion in organizations creates critical resources that are useful for creating and sustaining system-level relational capacities. By resources, we mean relational outcomes

or assets that can be drawn on in use (Feldman, 2004) to facilitate cooperative or collaborative action between people. Specifically, we argue that compassion between organizational members increases trust and felt connections between members, and generates positive emotions, all of which increase the potential for OCC. Within an organization, compassion not only generates such resources in those directly involved in a compassionate interaction, it also generates resources in third-party organizational members who witness or are made aware of these compassionate interactions.

*Trust.* Compassion between individuals increases levels of interpersonal trust, or the degree of confidence that one has and one's willingness to act on the basis of the words, actions, and decisions of others (McAllister, 1995). When someone experiences compassion directly or witnesses its occurrence they feel greater trust that, should they be faced with a difficult time in their own lives, they can count on those around them. An employee at Midwestern Health System (MHS) describes the impact of seeing the capacity for compassion in his co-workers:

“A coworker with 7 children needed immediate bypass surgery. His disability insurance only gave his family 2/3 of his normal income – we knew that wasn't enough. I set up a Tax Free Trust Fund and ended up getting a little over \$5800.00 - more than enough to cover his losses of being off work for the extended period of time. I couldn't believe that our lab of 75 came up with that much money in less than 1 week. It still means a lot to me – to know I work with such caring people.”

The person telling this story conveys amazement at the sheer amount of financial support shown by his co-workers, and through his characterization of them as ‘caring people’ he suggests his impression of them as people who can be trusted or counted on to act with similar compassion in the future. This trust allows people to suspend a self-focus and develop an understanding that they will not be taken advantage of (Porter, Lawler, & Hackman, 1975), thus creating conditions where they are more open to finding areas of mutual interest and shared advantage, making cooperation more likely and more effective.

*Quality of connection.* In a closely related way, compassion alters the felt connection between people, increasing the quality of the connection. In higher quality connections there is more engagement and a heightened sense of give and take (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Some people actually verbalize a bond that is formed with those who have provided compassion. One MHS employee describes the connection that she felt with the people who had helped her through a difficult period in her own life:

“For six months I tried to hold down my job while attending to my critically ill mother’s needs. Daily I was asked how she was doing, how I was doing, and what can we do to help. Very often there was not anything they could do to help but knowing that they cared and were willing was a wonderful boost to my spirit. The bond you develop with coworkers after an experience like this is irreplaceable!”

This story demonstrates the increase in quality of connection that can be created between compassion receivers and compassion givers. Acts of compassion can also strengthen

bonds between those who work together to provide compassion to someone in pain.

Another employee from MHS describes a time when her supervisor's pet was diagnosed with cancer and eventually died. During this time, she and her co-workers showed great compassion for their supervisor:

“As each day passed, my supervisor shared more details and past ‘happy’ stories about her pet. We all listened everyday, sympathizing with her everyday – until the day came when she called in to work telling us she would be in late because Tooter finally passed away. Just knowing how much her pet meant to her we all decided to chip in and send her family some flowers in honor of Tooter. We all shared a moving experience. It brought us all closer – not just as co-workers, but as friends.”

This example shows clearly the change in the quality and strength of the connection felt between co-workers as a result of their collective expression of compassion. This effect is not limited to those who actually participate in the compassionate episode; in some instances, being witness to compassion may alter the quality of connection between people. In a study of academics and their experience of compassion at work, we heard this effect expressed in many ways. As one person describes his/her experience, “After someone has been compassionate, they loom as an important person in my life” (Frost et al., 2000: 37). In another story an art professor told of a time a student was sharing artwork that embodied her partner's suicide. When she described how she reacted with compassion, she also provided testimony to how people at all levels of involvement in this compassion episode felt a change in connection and the kinds of reactions that were called forth:

“We have all been touched by death, if not suicide, in some way... So I just talked about that. ... None of us could understand the pain she had experienced... and that it was incredibly valuable for all of us to have her share it with us, what it meant and how her life would be forever affected. The other students were deeply affected. They were so supportive of her and thanked her and talked about it. Some of them opened up and said things about deaths that had affected them.”

(Frost et al, 2000: 37)

Here, bearing witness to an act of compassion between the professor and her student brought everyone in the classroom closer together. The change in the quality of classmates’ connections to each other and to their professor is reflected in their increased comfort with revealing more intimate details about their experiences with death.

Dutton (2003) suggests an association between improving the quality of connections between people and the minimization of the flexing of power in power imbalanced relationships. Thus, it seems that higher quality connections involve less abuse of power and this is associated with increased cooperation (Kopelman, Weber, & Messick, 2001).

*Positive emotions.* Finally, the experience of compassion builds enduring resources through the increase in positive emotions that often result from a compassionate episode. Positive emotions are more than just feeling good in the moment; as argued by Fredrickson (1998, 2000) positive emotions actually lead to enduring change in functioning at both an individual and organizational levels. This claim is based on the broaden-and-build model of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998) which describes positive emotions as both broadening people’s thought-action repertoire and

building their physical, intellectual, and social resources. As seen through the examples below, compassion elicits positive emotions in both those who receive and witness it. Consistent with Sekerka and Fredrickson (2003), we argue that the experience of positive emotion builds relational capacities of the whole (in this case, OCC), by increasing people's willingness to help one another (Isen, 1987). This helping spawns further positive emotions which increases the desire to help even more. Thus positive emotions create positive spirals of helping and interpersonal cooperation that generate even more positive emotion (Fredrickson, 2003).

For the person who is in pain, experienced compassion can lead to a sense of gratitude. An employee at MHS who was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis describes her co-workers as being there for her during "the darkest time of her life." She says, "My co-workers showed me more love and compassion than I would have ever imagined. Do I wish that I didn't have MS? Of course. But would I give up this opportunity to witness and be on the receiving end of so much love? No way". She feels deep gratitude for the compassion that her co-workers had shown her, which Emmons (2003) argues creates an important social resource in that it increases the likelihood of future prosocial behaviors.

For those who witness acts of compassion occurring around them, experienced compassion may lead to a sense of pride. In MHS, compassion is expressed not only between co-workers, but toward patients and their families as well. Although compassion may often be taken for granted as 'part of the job description' for health care workers, it is clear from the story below that this form of compassion has a significant impact on those who witness it:

“When an extremely obese patient’s kidneys shut down, due to the fact that his family had no money and he weighed over 700 lbs when he died, no funeral home would accept his body. Our Chaplin arranged to have a funeral service in the Chapel and several nurses from Critical Care donated money for flowers. Within 4 hours time they had over 20 family members present for a viewing and farewell ceremony. The case management department also found a funeral home to cremate the body free of charge. I was so impressed by the love & compassion I saw demonstrated for a family of no reputation. I was proud to work at MHS.”

The person who shared this story with us was able to verbalize the pride that she felt in her co-workers and her organization as a whole as a result of the compassion she observed. A sense of pride, argues Fredrickson (2000), creates the urge to share with others the source of this sense of pride, and to continue to act in ways that will maintain or enhance it. We argue, then, that the pride felt after being involved in a compassionate episode is an important social resource because, by sharing the story of compassion with others, the characterization of the whole as a compassionate system is strengthened and people are more likely to act in ways that are aligned with this characterization. In addition, bearing witness to such an act also inspires people to act in ways that benefit the greater good (Haidt, 2003), thus prompting further act of compassion.

In sum, important social resources are created by the increase in trust, quality of connections, and positive emotion that accompany experienced compassion.

### **Compassion strengthens shared values and beliefs**

Compassion transforms the social context in which it occurs by strengthening certain values and beliefs by making them more visible and actionable. First, compassion as symbolic action affirms the values of dignity and mutual respect. Compassion as expressed human connection is a living testimony to the value that human beings have for each other. An employee at MHS describes the treatment of a homeless woman who had repeatedly trespassed in their office tower and had observable psychiatric disturbance. Building management called the hospital's Behavioral Health staff to obtain information about community resources, and then contacted these agencies on the woman's behalf, who then intervened to assist this woman. Says the employee, "Given a choice between an expedient 'taking care of a problem' and trying to go the extra mile to help an individual, staff chose the compassionate route". Witnessing the dignity and respect evident in the building management's actions may have served to affirm the value of the whole.

Compassion also affirms the value of the common good. Acts of compassion provide evidence of a sense of commitment that a community of people have to each other. Compassion in organizations is behavior that is other-focused at its core. It dissipates self-interest, and center stages other-interest, affirming the existence of common ground and common good and strengthening the social whole (Wuthnow, 1991). Blum (1980) argues that compassion carries with it a sense of shared humanity and this promotes the experience of equality. It transcends social boundaries and connects people to each other in a more fundamental way—at the level of their basic humanity. A story from another

employee at MHS describes how even as a temporary employee she experienced compassion from a co-worker:

“At a point in my life when I was struggling to recover from a bad stretch of underemployment and debt pressure, I was employed here as a temporary employee, with no benefits. Not being very talkative, I was surprised to find myself “unloading” on a co-worker and sharing with her my concern over lack of health benefits for my kids. A day or so after this, when I’d forgotten all about the conversation, the co-worker came up to me with a brochure for a low-cost health program for which I might qualify. I was touched and impressed. I felt this person’s act to be representative of organizational values, and this was a material factor in accepting my permanent position here.”

This example demonstrates beautifully how small acts of compassion can have large effects. This relatively small action affirmed for the person telling the story both her place as an equal, and strengthened what she believed to be important organizational values. Beyond the personal meaning that this had for her, it made her want to become a more permanent part of this community.

Finally, compassion in organizations reminds people of their interdependence with each other, strengthening this as a shared belief. It reminds them of their own importance in the lives of others, and affirms that they can rely on one another, especially during difficult times. An employee at MHS tells of a time when a co-worker found out that both of her parents had cancer:

“She needed to take a leave to care for her parents. Our department donated vacation hours and personal hours and was able to present her with a check for over \$1000.00. We also donated meals, that we delivered to her and spent time sitting with her or for her so she could run errands or rest. Ultimately her father passed away and now her mom resides with her and her family. My friend is back to work but as her mom’s cancer progresses I’m sure she’ll need to take off again and we’ll all be there to help again. What comes around goes around. We have to be here for each other.”

In sum, compassion in organizations is interpersonal behavior that cultivates a culture where people recognize and value their interconnectedness, contributing to a more heightened sense of community and collective identity. It increases OCC by affirming joint interests and shared fate, while at the same time, helping people to feel safe and valued through mutual respect and the honoring of each person’s humanity.

### **Compassion cultivates critical skills.**

While people are born with a capacity to be compassionate (Nussbaum, 1996), in many institutions – whether they are families, schools or work organizations – that “natural” capacity is dulled and sometimes erased. Thus, when people are compassionate or witness others being compassionate it awakens certain innate skills and deepens people’s capacity to exercise them as well. A story from MHS exemplifies how after experiencing compassion during a difficult time in one’s own life, people are more likely to act with compassion themselves:

“I was diagnosed with breast cancer in January 1999. I did not realize that I worked with so many caring, giving, wonderful people. I was flooded with hugs, prayers, gifts and tons of support throughout my various surgeries and chemotherapy. I was so overwhelmed when food was delivered to my house to feed my family of 6 by this group of very caring people. I have never felt so loved. This experience has given me a deeper commitment to my co-workers...I find myself contributing to all other calls for sharing and giving.”

In addition, compassion improves peoples’ emotional attunement or their sense of being able to gauge the emotional state of another person. This is one of the reasons that compassion has become a behavior and value that the medical profession is trying to foster (Brody, 1992; Cassell, 2002; von Dietze & Orb, 2000). For example, Patricia Benner and her colleagues have shown through their study of expert nurses the importance of emotional attunement or sensing and adapting one’s emotional awareness to the emotional state of another as central to the provision of quality care (Benner, Tanner, & Chelsa, 1996). In a study of compassion at work in university contexts, we found that people did sense changes in the degree to which people attuned to one another as a result of experiencing compassion. One study participant explained that her friend Jenny had become more attuned to her through episodes of compassion:

“Like the times when Jenny asks me if I’m okay, I know that someone cares about me... There’s no rhyme or reason for when she asks me, but when she asks me I need to be asked. She knows that somehow... We feel the life of each other... and it means so much to me and I know she knows that.” (Frost et al., 2000, p. 33).

Compassion may enhance emotional attunement by improving listening skills or other forms of interpersonal connecting. For example, in one study of how peer supporters with multiple sclerosis provided care and support to people with the same disease, there was significant shift in listening skills that resulted from this form of compassion. As one person put it:

“There is a quietness when I’m talking to someone, and I’m listening to them, I have to make an effort not to try to top them. It’s gotten easier. And I can listen, and I become quite interested in what he’s talking about. That’s a change. There’s quietness in the soul because of it” (Schwartz & Sendor, 1999: 1572.)

The mode of connecting in compassion is one of being other-focused, resulting in a fine-tuning of one’s receptors to the changed emotional and cognitive states of another person. Compassion also develops and strengthens enabling skills. By enabling skills we mean the set of behaviors that one person does that allows others to be more successful at what they are doing (Dutton, 2003). People learn through the expression of compassion that small acts of caring enable another person to carry on in the face of his or her pain or grief. Thus, compassion opens the door to responding with one’s presence, one’s attention, one’s touch—simple moves that communicate a “being with” the other person. This type of awareness expands people’s repertoires of how they can enable others—often moving people from thinking that they have to enable with grand gestures (as implied, for example, by extensive mentoring programs or buddy systems), to the realization that small expressions of their own humanity can be important enabling moves. This expansion of response repertoires echoes what Miller and Stiver (1997) argue happens when people act in mutuality with each other.

Here, compassion in organizations cultivates skills that allow people to focus on and attend to others. When people are overly self-focused they often exhibit a decrease in prosocial behavior (Gibbons & Wicklund, 1982). Instances of compassion, however, create conditions where the condition of others becomes more salient and people are able to suspend their own self-interest and put the needs of others ahead of their own.

Compassion thus cultivates skills that lead to more collectivist behavior, where the well-being of the group takes precedence over personal interests, and this leads to greater levels of cooperation (Wagner, 1995).

### **Building OCC through individual acts of compassion**

In the preceding sections, we identified three sets of ingredients that are foundations for building an organization's collective capability for cooperation. The goal of this section is to provide a theoretical sketch of how interpersonal acts of compassion among organizational members, through the generation of essential resources, values and beliefs, and skills, contribute to the cooperative capability of the whole organization. To this point, we have shown that interpersonal acts of compassion generate relational resources, shared values and beliefs, and critical interpersonal skills, all of which increase individuals' capability for cooperation. Now we develop a framework for understanding how such acts among individuals build and contribute to a system-level capability for cooperation and how this capability, in turn, influences the actual doing of cooperation among individual organizational members.

Interpersonal acts of compassion among individuals can develop into a system-level capability for cooperation as members of the organization develop a shared awareness of the acts. The generation of resources, the promotion and reinforcement of values and beliefs, and the cultivation of critical skills occur when organizational members become increasingly aware of compassionate acts just as they do when members witness these acts directly. One way that awareness can spread throughout an organization is through informal story telling. When acts of compassion occur within an organization, members, particularly those directly involved and/or those who witness the acts, may share the story of what happened with their co-workers during informal interactions and conversations.

As organizational members communicate with each other and spread the word about compassionate acts, they move toward a shared understanding of the events themselves as well as their meaning and significance. In seeing that others in their organization are responded to with compassion, those who hear stories of compassion often develop a sense that they too, as fellow organizational members, would be taken care of in a difficult time. As a result, the trust, the deepened sense of connection to others, and the positive emotions that compassionate acts generate will be able to spread. The sharing of stories is also how organizational members come to develop an idea of 'how things work around here', and this increases the likelihood that the values and beliefs reflected in the acts themselves will come to be shared by those who hear and tell the stories. Telling stories of compassionate acts is also instructive in that it teaches others about how to be

compassionate and how to do compassion. In this way, stories also help to cultivate the critical skills.

Story telling can also occur in organizations via more formal channels. For instance, MHS used to distribute a monthly newsletter called “Caring Times” to the hospital’s entire staff. This newsletter was composed of stories about hospital employees engaging in caring and compassionate acts. Practices such as this serve two important functions. First, they encourage hospital employees to look for instances of compassion and tell stories about what they see. Second, they legitimize the stories and spread them throughout the organization in a way that articulates not only what happened, but also the storyteller’s experience of what happened. Thus, the sharing and propagation of these stories communicates the relational resources, values, beliefs, and skills to others throughout the organization. By making this type of story telling an institutionalized practice, organizations can increase the likelihood that individual members will regard these important products as being of the organization as a whole. For instance, to the extent that any one story reflects the values of mutual respect and dignity, it is likely that people will develop a sense that such values are endorsed and shared by the organization as a whole rather than seeing them as the exclusive values of the storyteller. However, it is important for organizations to use caution when attempting to formalize or institutionalize compassion. If an organization’s rhetoric about the value of compassion is not consistent with the way the organization does business, formal mechanisms for spreading the word about compassion may come across as insincere and manipulative, thus undermining their intended effects.

Organizational leaders can play important roles in increasing awareness of compassionate acts throughout their organizations by acknowledging the acts of others and by modeling compassion in their own actions (Boyatzis, Smith, & Tresser, 2003; Dutton et al., 2002). Being that leaders are typically highly public figures in their organizations, these practices serve to spread the word about compassion in ways analogous to formal storytelling. Also, to the extent that leaders embody the organizational whole, these practices endorse and legitimize compassionate action on behalf of the organization (Frost, 2003).

Leadership practices and formal and informal story telling help to spread the relational resources, values and beliefs, and critical skills that compassionate acts generate throughout a social system, thus building the system's collective capability for cooperation. To the extent that such a capability is present in an organization, individual members will be able to act more cooperatively (the load factor) and they will be able to do so more effectively (the competence factor). The relational resources serve as the basic raw materials on which individuals can draw in their daily actions such that will act in ways that reflect a heightened sense of trust, a deepened sense of connection with others, and positive feelings of gratitude and pride. Thus, individuals will be well equipped to cooperate. Additionally, when individuals collectively value dignity, respect, and the common good and they believe in interdependence, they will be more likely to take a cooperative approach to their work. These shared values and beliefs also improve people's cooperative competence because they help people align their actions with others

in the organization. Finally, the critical skills that compassionate acts generate serve as a means for acting cooperatively, thus improving people's cooperative competence.

### **The importance of bridging compassion and OCC**

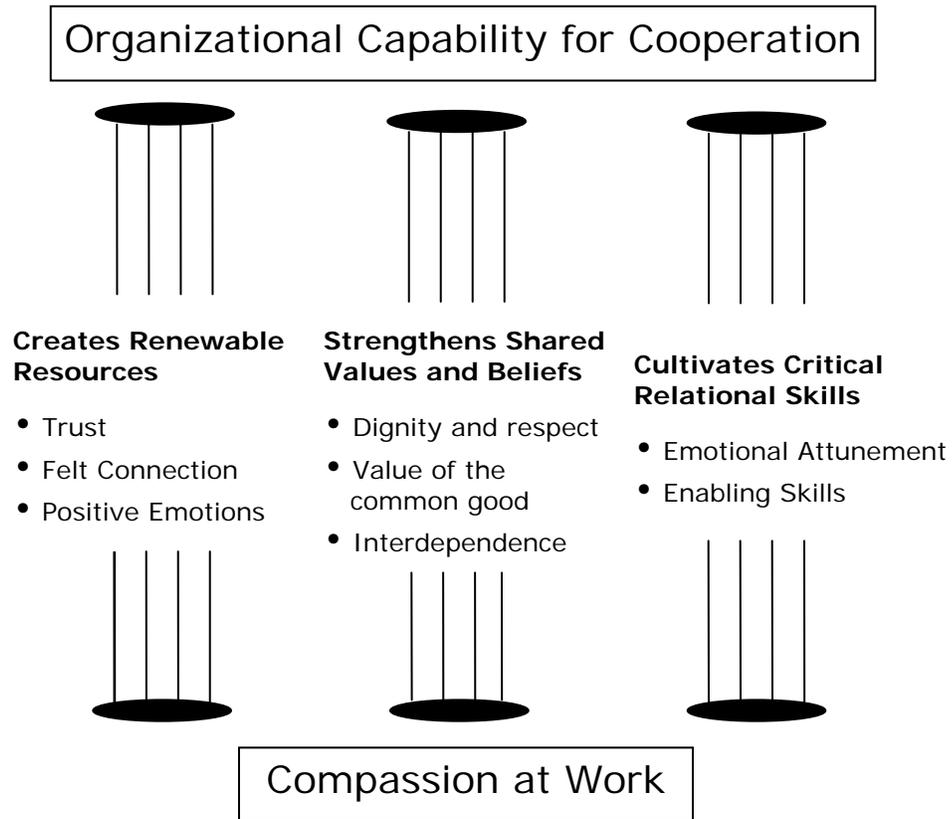
This chapter develops our understanding of how daily expressions of compassion among members of work organizations build and enable an organization's capability for cooperation as a whole through three mechanisms. Compassion among members of organization generates renewable resources, strengthens values and beliefs, and cultivates skills. In describing how the seemingly trivial actions and expressions of individuals can have big system-wide effects, this theoretical framework bridges micro-level processes with system-level properties.

By looking at organizations through a lens of compassion, we can see how seemingly small interpersonal actions can have big system-wide effects. First, the expression of compassion is a relational process that creates renewable resources of trust, quality connections, and positive emotions. Second, acts of compassion express and reaffirm shared values of dignity, mutual respect, the common good, and interdependence by making the values visible and actionable to members throughout an organization. Lastly, acts of compassion, as interpersonal exercises of noticing, feeling, and responding to others' emotional states, strengthen member's compassion skills and cultivate their ability to emotionally attune to and enable each other. Through each of these three mechanisms, interpersonal acts of compassion build a system's capability for cooperation. We return to the Dalai Lama in closing:

"A mind committed to compassion is like an overflowing reservoir -- a constant source of energy, determination and kindness. This mind is like a seed; when cultivated, it gives rise to many other good qualities, such as forgiveness, tolerance, inner strength and the confidence to overcome fear and insecurity... we should not limit our expressions of love and compassion to our family and friends. Nor is compassion only the responsibility of clergy, health care, and social workers. It is the necessary business of every part of the human community."

~The Dalai Lama~

**Figure 1: Core arguments linking compassion at work to cooperation capability of an organization**



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<sup>2</sup> The majority of our examples come from interviews with the employees of a Midwestern health system (referred to from this point as Midwestern Health System (MHS)) and from a study of academic staff and faculty.