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## A CONVERSATION WITH MONICA WORLINE AND JANE DUTTON: COMPASSION IN ORGANIZATIONS

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (h)

### Abstract:

Riane Eisler talks with Monica C. Worline, PhD, Executive Director of CompassionLab and Research Scientist at the Center for Compassion and Altruism at Stanford University, and Jane E. Dutton, PhD, Professor of Business Administration and Psychology and co-founder of the Center for Positive Organizations at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, about the role of compassion in transforming organizational cultures from domination to partnership.

**Keywords:** compassion, caring, business, cultural transformation, domination, partnership, organizational effectiveness, personal development, management, leadership.

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**Riane Eisler:** Thank you, Jane and Monica, for the important work you are both doing in the new field of compassion in organizations, which is so aligned with the cultural shift from domination to partnership. As you know, the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* is dedicated to gathering and publishing the best scholarship on this subject, as well as contributions from practitioners and others working to facilitate and accelerate this shift. The vision of our journal is “To share scholarship and create connections for cultural transformation to build a world in which all relationships, institutions, policies, and organizations are based on principles of partnership.” Compassion and caring are essential components of partnership cultures, so your research is directly relevant to this cultural transformation.

I always like to start interviews on a personal note. Could you tell us what in your own lives led you to study compassion in organizations?

**Jane Dutton:** I became interested in compassion the more that I saw suffering in the workplace (my own workplace, and the workplaces I studied and in which my students were working). However, the real push to deepen my understanding of compassion at work arose when my family had a medical trauma with our youngest daughter and we witnessed firsthand what a difference compassion at work meant for our own healing, resilience, engagement at work, ability to perform in our jobs, and our loyalty and attachment to our workplace.

**Monica Worline:** I grew up in a small, rural community where generations of families knew one another and the work of offering compassion was truly a community accomplishment—it was just second nature to respond to life events of others with offers of support, delivering meals, or otherwise taking action to address suffering. When I left that community, I realize now that I implicitly carried with me the expectation that all communities would do this work as a part of caring for members, but I learned that relatively few work environments conceived of themselves as communities, and the work of compassion was often left undone. When I had the opportunity to join Jane and others who were doing research on this topic, it allowed me to formally address and understand something that I had felt and known through my intuition for quite some time.

**Eisler:** What do you mean by compassion in organizations?

**Worline & Dutton:** We define compassion as a four-part human experience that unfolds in relation to suffering. This stance orients us toward compassion as a *social process* rather than as an emotion.

The first part of the process involves noticing pain—we have to direct attention toward suffering in order to respond with compassion. The second part involves interpreting

suffering in ways that open up our shared humanity and lead us to understand those who are suffering as worthy of our compassion. The third part of the process involves feeling empathic concern—this is the emotional aspect of the process. And the fourth part is acting to alleviate suffering in some way. This action can be more or less skilled, and can be coordinated with greater or lesser competence—so this aspect allows us to show the variety of work and the skill involved in creating compassion in workplaces.

Compassion falls under the umbrella of caring, but caring is a much broader concept. We think of caring as a form of interest in and concern for the well-being of others, whether or not they are suffering. Compassion, as a distinctive experience, always follows from suffering or distress of some kind.

**Eisler:** Your book, *Awakening Compassion at Work: The Quiet Power that Elevates People and Organizations* [Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017], summarizes both your findings and those of others showing that empathy and caring, which in conventional thinking have been seen at best as irrelevant in the workplace, are actually key to effective and humane organizational cultures. Can you tell us how a positive work culture leads to improved employee loyalty, engagement, performance, creativity, and productivity?

**Worline & Dutton:** Well, we aren't writing about positive work cultures, generally; we are focused specifically on the presence of compassion in the work environment. The evidence for the impact of positive work cultures is a quite broad and rapidly growing literature now—something we are delighted to see.

In relation to compassion in particular, we surveyed multiple disciplines to understand the best evidence for the effects of compassion in work environments, and we find solid evidence for several ways that compassion fuels strategic advantages for organizations. One is that the presence of compassion in work environments creates psychological safety, which is crucial to learning and innovation. Another is that compassion in work environments relates to resilience in profitability during downturns, in part

because it is strongly related to both employee engagement and client engagement. More compassionate workplaces are more likely to attract and retain talented employees, since compassion relates strongly to commitment and loyalty. And finally, compassion at work fuels great service because when people feel more supported by co-workers and they have more role models for compassion at work, they are better able to handle customer or client pain and to customize their responses in ways that help customers feel that they have been treated to great hospitality.

**Eisler:** You write about compassion competence, and how to design and lead for it. Could you please elaborate?

**Worline & Dutton:** The idea of compassion competence has two parts. First, compassion in workplaces is not solely a dyadic event; often many people are involved. And second, not all compassion is equally effective in alleviating pain.

We have found that each response to suffering is unique and emergent, but systems tend to vary in the degree to which they can create compassion quickly, at the right scale, and with a high degree of customization. When systems are more competent, they can respond quickly, they can perform a variety of actions, they can generate a useful scale of resources (not too little or too much), and they can do things that are customized to the idiosyncratic needs of those in pain.

So in our book we summarize these dimensions or qualities of a systemic compassionate response to suffering that help us to capture the competence involved. The first quality is *speed*: compassion varies in how quickly it flows after the system detects suffering. Second, compassion varies in *scope*: the variety or range of different kinds of responses to suffering. Third, compassion varies in its *scale*: the magnitude or the literal size of the response to suffering. Finally, compassion varies in *customization*: the degree to which the compassionate response is uniquely tailored to those who are suffering.

**Eisler:** You write that “caring is a competitive advantage.” Could you elaborate on this?

**Worline & Dutton:** We have often been asked over the years whether compassion has any “bottom line” effects. The kind of research that looks solely at “bottom line” is rare and probably does not capture the full range of effects of compassion in work organizations. So instead of limiting our view to profit and “bottom line” effects, we try to look at a variety of ways that compassion in a work environment undergirds human capabilities that are necessary for an organization to succeed. When we claim compassion or care as a competitive advantage, we mean that an organization that is caring can foster capabilities that contribute to a variety of forms of organizational effectiveness, while being difficult for competitors to imitate. These capabilities include those we mentioned above, such as innovation and service quality. They also include collaboration and adaptability to change. Thus, rather than being “soft” and “nice to have,” when we look through the lens of strategic capabilities we see that care and compassion contributes powerfully to organizational strengths that allow an organization to succeed in the marketplace.

**Eisler:** You give many examples in your book on how compassion is put into action, such as how Zeke was supported by his colleagues, his manager, and the company’s CEO after a devastating accident. Can you tell us about this?

**Worline & Dutton:** Zeke is a character from our research who suffered a seizure while biking and ended up requiring surgery and rehab after being paralyzed by the accident. Zeke was a relatively new salesperson in a global technology firm, but his organization responded immediately to Zeke’s accident with an outpouring of support, and they expanded their repertoire of action over time in a way that is, for us, a striking example of compassion competence across a global organizational system.

Part of the reason we tell the story of Zeke and his organization is to provide an example of what we call positively deviant compassion. We suffer from a dearth of examples like these, in which large organizations can respond to employees located in many parts of the globe with a great deal of competence. We tend to assume that compassion

is limited by size of organizations, and we tend to hear stories of compassion that are directed toward those at the top of the hierarchy. Zeke's story challenges these assumptions, showing us how a system can accomplish extraordinary compassion competence evidenced by people at multiple levels and locations in episodes that are long-term—in this case, lasting over a period of more than 18 months.

Zeke's story also sets up the section of our book that illuminates the elements of a system that contribute to this extraordinary compassion competence. We highlight how features of the organization that include culture and values, but go beyond those, contribute to the response. We call these features the social architecture of an organization, and we think it is important to consider not just culture and values, but also networks, roles, and routines as part of the infrastructure of compassion.

**Eisler:** What are some of the obstacles to compassion at work, and how can they be overcome?

**Worline & Dutton:** We can think of obstacles to compassion in relation to the definition we discussed above, a four-part human experience in response to suffering. The first aspect of compassion as a process involves noticing—and many things in organizations actually block us from noticing. When professional scripts or norms dampen emotional expression, it is harder to express and notice suffering. When we are busy and attentional load is high, it is harder to notice suffering. When people occupy high-status positions, research shows that they have a harder time noticing others in lower status positions. So mindfulness is a key to increasing focus and attention—and inquiry is helpful in discerning more about suffering.

A next step in the compassion process involves interpreting—and many things in organization block us from interpreting others' actions with generosity or giving the benefit of the doubt. Competitive pressures can shift our interpretations of others into win-lose dynamics that also block our empathy. Stereotypes and bias can block us from

seeing others as worthy of compassion. Time pressure and work demands can make us interpret others' suffering as a burden that we cannot bear, and so we are less likely to respond with compassion when we interpret that we don't have the resources.

A third step in the compassion process involves empathic concern—feeling concern for others' well-being. This is closely tied to interpreting, but also we learn from work such as that of sociologist Candace Clark, in her book *Misery and Company: Sympathy in Everyday Life* [University of Chicago Press, 1997], that every system has an “empathy economy” that makes feeling concern seem more or less costly to us. Anything we can do to lower the costs of empathy helps to remove obstacles to compassion: recognizing helping, valuing outreach to others, encouraging social and emotional support at work—all of these change the empathy economy.

Finally, the last step is acting to alleviate suffering. So often, compassion is blocked not because we don't feel concern but because we don't know what to do. Organizations exacerbate compassion dilemmas because of the worries over precedent and fairness of distribution of resources. We find that actions such as listening, offering to be present with others, and giving emotional support are valuable, but may be overlooked in an effort to “fix” someone's suffering. A heuristic we use to address this obstacle offers some simple wisdom: When in doubt, do something.

**Eisler:** How is compassion in the workplace related to the larger culture we live in, and how can education help people develop compassion?

**Worline & Dutton:** There are many ways that we can develop our compassion skills and grow our empathy—so education can actually become a force for these kinds of development when we invest in them and regard them as legitimate. Much of the contemporary scientific approach to compassion demonstrates that it is something we can learn and develop.

We also know that compassion is deeply related to larger cultural forces because



it is so tied to interpreting others and making sense of their suffering. When large cultural forces suggest that certain forms of suffering are stigmatized, that makes it more difficult to enact compassion for them. For instance, Candace Clark's work finds that those who are suffering from poverty are less likely to be treated with compassion in the US, because poverty is a stigmatized form of suffering that goes along with an interpretation of laziness or lack of effort. While we know this is not reality, this widespread cultural bias in our interpretations of others' actions makes it far more difficult to activate compassion on a broader scale. As inequality in society grows, this obstacle to compassion really hinders our capacity to come up with societal competence in addressing suffering that touches so many of us.

**Eisler:** What role can scholars play in accelerating the shift toward compassionate organizations? What role can this journal play?

**Worline & Dutton:** Scholars have a significant role to play by doing more research on the compassion process in organizations and in partnerships. While we see the tremendous growth of compassion research over the past 20 years, there are still many unaddressed questions related to what contributes to compassion in organizations and what outcomes are associated with compassion.

Our work is intended to be an invitation to scholars to see compassion as a process vital to the functioning of work in organizations. Even with the rapid evolution of technology, work is a deeply human activity. Where there is human work, there is suffering. Where there is suffering, there is most likely compassion.

In relation to this journal, we are thrilled that you are opening up a conversation on principles of partnership and how topics such as compassion and care fit into this transformation from domination to partnership. We feel a strong need to expand this conversation and to bring more people from different perspectives together to deepen

our knowledge. Our deepest hope is that scholars will foster an understanding and appreciation of how compassion is part of most aspects of organizational life.

**Eisler:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Worline & Dutton:** We'd like to close with a call to compassion for anyone in any kind of work and also with a reminder that while compassion is a complex process, it is also always available to us. We see so much compassion thwarted because people don't know what to do or say, or because they worry about their place in a system. We want to remind anyone reading this that our human presence with another person who is suffering is a powerful form of action. Often we cannot "fix" the root of suffering—and that hubris of needing or wanting to fix another person's circumstances can hinder us from simply being with them. Our colleague, professor of organizational behavior Peter Frost, reminded us in his book, *Toxic Emotions at Work* [Harvard Business School Press, 2003], that "There's always pain in the room." When we remember that, we become more effective as leaders and as teachers and as members of a community. We become powerfully compassionate when we couple our acknowledgement of widespread suffering around us with the fact that compassion is always available. We might invite readers to think of it this way: There's always pain in the room, so compassion is always possible.

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