



*Building a Compassionate Culture* **IN A COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT**

*Compassion*

**COMPETITION?**

There may be many ways of building a compassionate culture in a competitive environment but let me tell you two of them that I know in theory and practice. One is through exposure to sustainable compassion and the other is through training in mindfulness and compassion.

Compassion for me starts when we ‘see’ the universal preciousness of each person—underneath the secondary accidents of race, gender, abilities, looks, etc. They’re all accidents because no human being in all history and in all the world has chosen her/his own race, gender, abilities and looks and yet there’s a tendency for us to cling to these properties to the point of other-ing, fear and even violence—blinding each one of us from the reality of our common humanity. It’s when we ‘see’ that we begin to feel. And when we feel, we can begin to ‘act’.

I’m grateful that this insight came to me not from books or talks but from seeing the life example of my parents. Just a few weeks before this conference, I discovered that my Papa is doing something I consider incredibly compassionate to people he doesn’t even know. (He’ll be embarrassed if I go public with it so I’ll just focus on my Mama Carmen)

Mama didn’t come from an affluent family but was able to work her way up to become a clinical instructor for a master’s nursing programme. She taught and worked as a nurse full time. With my dad, she also took care of the family very well when she came home from a tiring job of caring for other people. To add to her (and my dad’s) responsibilities, she also cared for our two elderly and sick grannies at home. She was compassionate through and through, 24/7. And what’s striking was that there’s no memory from me or my siblings of her complaining about the enormous task to live out care and compassion within the household. There was no moaning about treating bed sores, uncontrolled bowel movements, and irritability. My brother even said to me last week that he remembers Mama having a ‘lightness of being’ that’s contagious to the family and the people she met. Outside the family, she gave practical help to people who found it hard to get education and medical care due to poverty. She talked to anyone and everyone just because she ‘saw’ them. I saw too that she always had predilection to the poor.

Mama Carmen died at 45, alone in the US, because she flew ahead of the family to prepare for us moving there. When people heard about this, we started receiving monetary contributions for her medical bill.

It was a huge medical bill that was totally paid off by donations from people who knew Mama. Even two months after her death, money was still pouring in. That’s when we decided to give 100% of the surplus in support of nurses. For many years after her death, Mama still continued giving financially to those in need through the Carmen Gonzalez Memorial Award.

At her funeral, I remember there were at least 5 massive buses, a number of jeepneys (like small buses) and countless cars full of people mourning her loss. (I thought she was a celebrity at that point!) And then a week after, a mum of 3 kids walked up to me in our street to ask if I was Carmen’s son. I said yes. So she thanked me because, according to her, my mum paid for her kids’ tuition fees. My only reaction in my head was, did Papa know about this? :)

Mama always admired my granny’s compassion to people around her. That’s probably where she got hers. Be it emotional contagion, epigenetics, the experience is powerful. Interestingly, Mama seemed to have practised the harmony between being compassionate to her self—through humour—and showing compassion to others. That makes her very human, reachable.

Compassion arguably isn’t just a feeling (you don’t have to feel it necessarily). But I believe you’ve got to have the ‘eyes’ to see suffering so you can act to alleviate it. That’s where mindful awareness comes in. This is the reason why I consider myself a student of compassion—not because of any personal merit but mostly because a compassionate life touched me. I ‘saw’ it.

# *The* LANGUAGE

Assassin's  
Mentality

(Smith, 2019)

Interrupt more,  
show power

(Gino, 2017)

*Companies have to do  
well. Productivity...*

(Porter, 2012)

*"Compassion protects us  
more than guns, bombs,  
and money."*

(Hanh, 2014)

Compassionate 'Deep'  
listening

(Hanh, 2012)

*"Become more human.  
Don't be afraid of not  
being successful."*

(Vanier, 2018)



# *Potential* BARRIERS

Confusion with term  
'compassion'

Self-preservation, selfishness &  
greed?

Back to old environment

## BARRIER 1 Confusion with the term compassion

We have technical definitions of compassion:

“altruistic motivation to intervene in favour of someone who is suffering or is in need”(Singer)

“a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it.”(Gilbert)

From a competitive standpoint, how will this be of help if we want to win against or ‘annihilate’ competition? It’s a contest between the strong and the weak. Compassion can be perceived as a weakness, therefore, not helpful for any organisation that wants to win—be it a tech company, a sports club, an innovation lab, a sales and marketing organisation, or whatever. Competition’s strength is in its ability to improve quality in performance.

And there are other words that make the everyday understanding of compassion more confusing, e.g., pity, charity, empathy, sympathy, etc.

The bottomline is—why would we adopt compassion if we want to win in a competitive environment? Here, the layperson’s understanding is far more important than the academic definition because the former opens or closes the door to compassion as a practice.

## BARRIER 2 Self-preservation, selfishness and greed

Self-preservation is very obvious when we’re on edge (reactive and unaware). It’s ‘my deadline’ that I’m about to miss that’s more important than your concerns. It’s the pressure this email gives me that I’ll have to prioritise before I even see that homeless person needing a warm coffee in a winter night. It’s my addiction to being right that can block me from listening to how I’ve caused you suffering. It’s my flu and my irritation over your needs.

Our current prevailing economic theories don’t help either. They’re mostly founded on the principles of selfishness and greed to the point that an economy of compassion seems impossible. In competitive environments, it’s understandable that people gravitate towards power, incessant accumulation, and proclivity to pleasure because these three can be perceived to be the perennial obvious escape from suffering. Even if compassion can be seen as something noble, these make it more difficult for compassion to inch its way through a dominant culture where the ego is king.

## BARRIER 3 Back to old environment

40 years worth of habits encounter an 8-week programme, a compassion-centred retreat, or an altruistic community. Plugged back into the old context of competitive criticism, insensitivity, self-centredness, machine-like treatment of people, impossible targets, and/or reactive incivility—without the time to practice mindfulness and compassion. Without people to practice with or to give support, what happens to the helpful habits practiced? ‘40-years worth of old habits vs. 8 weeks of practice’ means ‘2,085 weeks vs. 8.’ The math proves the necessity for communities of practice. That’s the reality.

External policy and structures also play a major part. In a recent New Savoy Partnership survey, data shows that 43% of staff reported feeling depressed in the previous week; 42% reported feeling like a failure in the past week; 72% think they’re understaffed to deliver effective care; and 23% were actively thinking of leaving the NHS. (Figures broadly consistent since 2014) You and I know that no amount of mind training solves genuine staffing problems.



# COST OF 'INCIVILITY' *Reactivity*

48% intentionally decreased their work effort.

47% intentionally decreased the time spent at work.

38% intentionally decreased the quality of their work.

80% lost work time worrying about the incident.

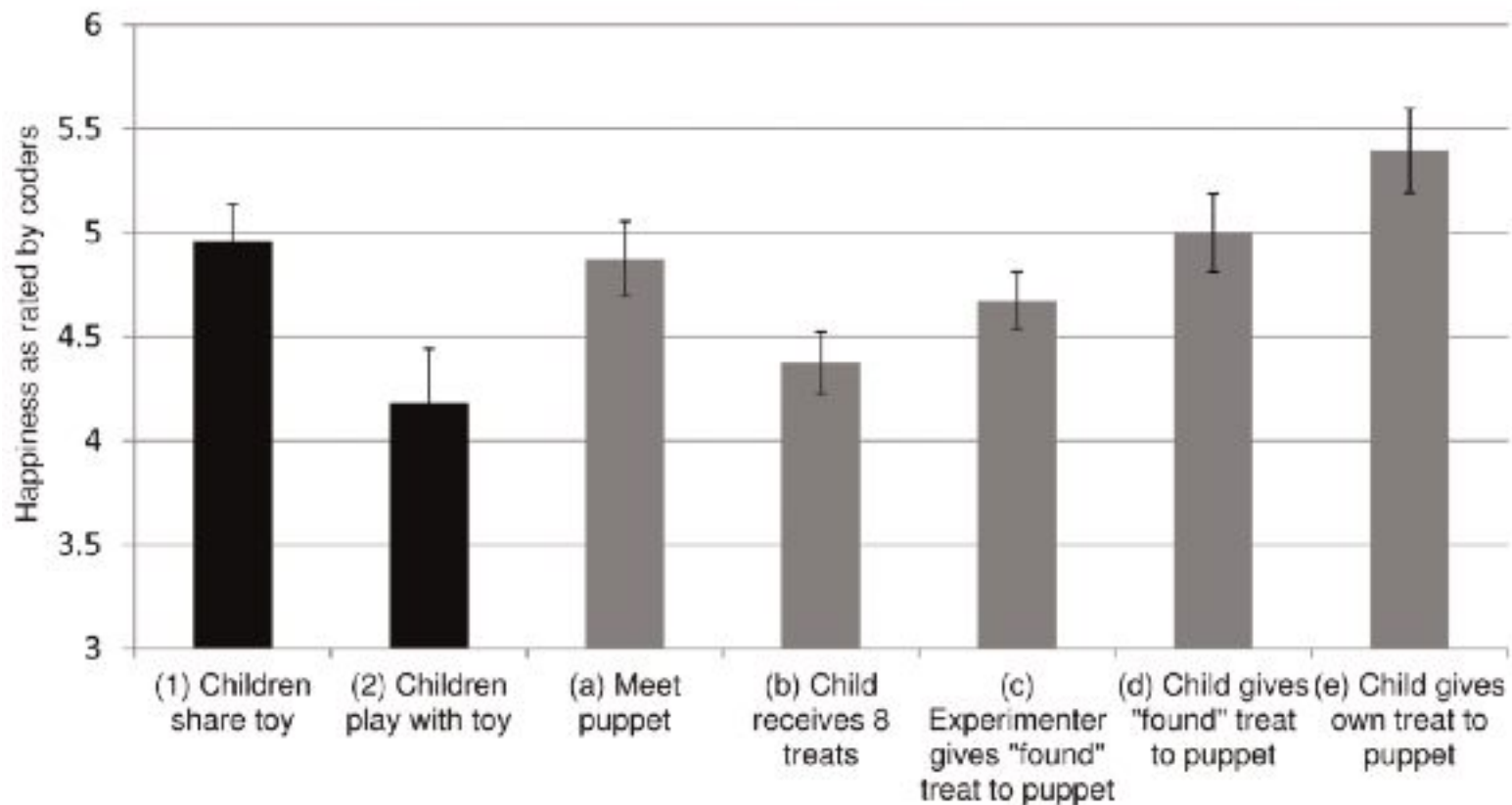
63% lost work time avoiding the offender.

66% said that their performance declined.

78% said that their commitment to the organization declined.

12% said that they left their job because of the uncivil treatment.

25% admitted to taking their frustration out on customers.





*A case for Compassion*  
IN COMPETITION?



*“What moves me is watching young men bond together and tap into the magic that arises when they focus their whole heart and soul on something greater than themselves.”*

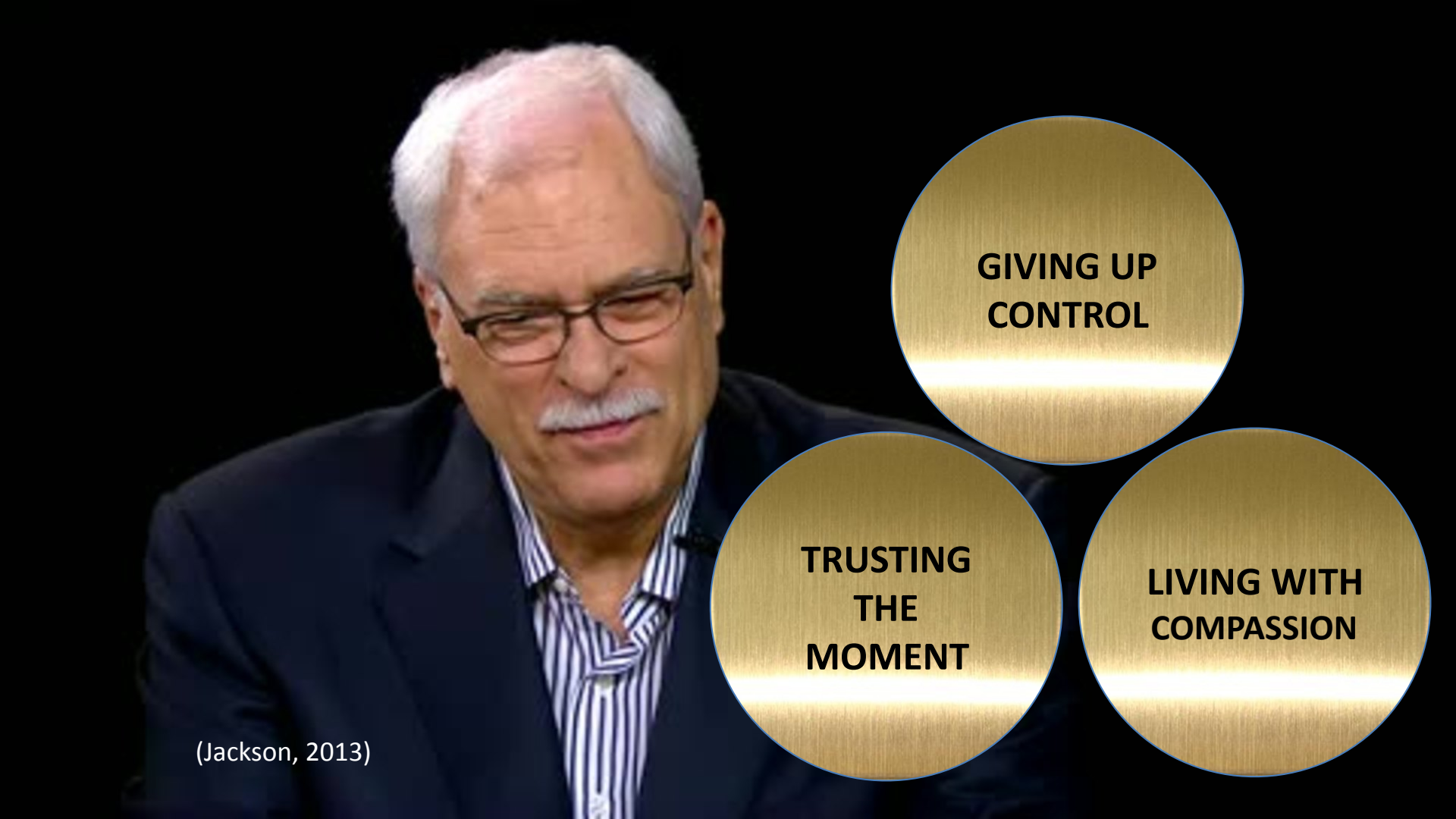
- Phil Jackson





# *Jackson* ELEVEN

1. Lead from the inside out
2. Bench the ego
3. Let each player discover his own destiny
4. The road to freedom is a beautiful system
5. Turn the mundane into the sacred
6. One breath, one mind
7. The key to success is compassion
8. Keep your eye on the spirit, not the scoreboard
9. Sometimes you have to pull out the big stick
10. When in doubt, do nothing
11. Forget the ring



**GIVING UP  
CONTROL**

**TRUSTING  
THE  
MOMENT**

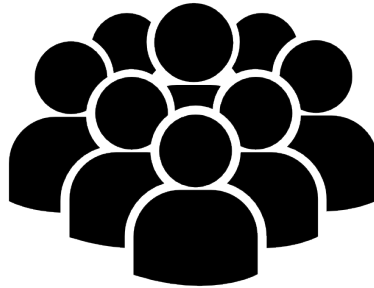
**LIVING WITH  
COMPASSION**

(Jackson, 2013)

# *Possible through* & THROUGH?



Compassionate leader



Compassionate staff  
Compassionate systems  
Compassionate culture



Compassionate results  
Right livelihood  
Pro humanity  
Pro earth

YES, it's possible... I've seen two of them and I'm volunteering with both.

L'Arche exemplifies the brilliance of humanity. Tenderness and compassion are at the heart of what they do in a community setting. In L'Arche, people with learning disabilities (a.k.a. Core members) are the teachers of compassion and 'being' human. I know this from my own experience with the community, my readings of the founder's philosophy, and my dialogues with the volunteers who benefit from L'Arche.

When I go to L'Arche, time becomes just the present moment. There's no more need to meet targets or to hurry up. Social comparison in terms of productivity and talent fade into the background. When Core members see a person, they just go over and talk to them. There's more space for 'being' human and less for being a function or a role. It's just this moment... with people of the heart. Can this compassion contagion be measured? This interest brought me to explore the \$1.3-million study by Fuller and Caltech called, "Love, Compassion, and Care: Virtue Science and Exemplarity in Real Life and in the Laboratory." The research involved an extensive self-identity interview, questionnaires, tasks involving decisions that reflect generosity and compassion, characteristics of eye-gaze to emotionally salient pictures, and patterns of brain activity. To find out more, please contact Warren Brown at [tri@fuller.edu](mailto:tri@fuller.edu). I contacted him myself and he generously shared with me their work.

And yes, people in L'Arche are productive too—having a catering social enterprise powered mostly by the powerless and an allotment that 'feeds.'

The other one is Storehouse.

This charity brilliantly prioritises people over task. In the tug-of-war between productivity and wellbeing, Storehouse proves productive. It's able to support itself well despite being in a competitive space where charities battle for limited funding. It raises its own funds primarily by sharing its ethos that a sense of humanity and community is over and above 'targets.'

Storehouse provides food, clothing and furniture to people in need. The leaders model kindness and compassion to the staff, volunteers and service users. I'm sure that it's not perfect because no organisation is. But because compassion is explicit, it's in the heart. And if it's in the heart, it's in the language—"You are welcome here...What is it that you need?" "We missed you last week." "It's alright if the kids play with the food hampers. Some other volunteer will sort them." (From the productivity standpoint, the last quote for me was the strangest thing to hear the leader say).

Adult volunteers pack hampers and distribute them to people on a weekly basis. Kids as young as 3 or 4 join their parents in sorting containers of sugar and biscuits. I think this is the right way to live and work.

It's compassion and kindness through and through. From the leaders to the staff and volunteers... then to the service users in need. Then the service users at some point 'find feet' to volunteer. It's an upward spiral of being fully human!



*Learning from* **THE HAPPY WISE**

‘Pretention’ disability  
Underdeveloped frantic ways  
People of ‘heart’ and ‘presence’

# *Compassionate Leaders* → CULTURES

The key is to have the right person for the right role. In the words of L'Arche Belfast Director, Scott Shively, “to build a compassionate culture, hire for compassion.” It’s easier to train for skills and knowledge. It’s harder to train for compassion.

While the principle is nice in theory, history shows that, according to Yuval Noah Harari, “humanity has found purpose in money.” It’s not in compassion. So our herculean task is to facilitate the shift.

This is where the mindfulness teacher comes in. The embodiment, the presence experienced by the participant shows the respect and the acknowledgment of the participants’ being—I listen to you...I see you...You are seen. The kindness and compassion shown (not just as a teacher’s function but as regular ‘practice’) disturb the habits of self-punishing and obsessive productivity in a competitive environment. The mindfulness teachers’ words, preparation in making tiny adjustments to care for the body, non-judgment of self and others, non-interrupting, focus and spaciousness—all these cultivate mindfulness through ‘encounter.’

I train senior leaders (CEO’s, directors, business owners, board members, etc.) with the hope that when they become more mindful and compassionate, the organisations they lead get affected. That’s the theory.

If you can’t hire for compassion, train for it. MINDFULNESS training has a great potential for this.

# *Big Role of* MINDFULNESS

I learned to be kind and compassionate to myself because of Claire's kindness/compassion to me in class. (Claire as facilitator of The Mindful Leader)

I'm actually sharing kindness to my team and asking them to be kind to themselves. As a leader, I have improved the environment of support and challenge. There's definitely a greater sense of "slowing down & proactivity" rather than "rushing & reactivity." I've been able to apply into my role the practice of sensing, just being present and kind—increasing self awareness... having greater consciousness of self, the reactive thoughts and impact on my body. I made space for peacefulness of thoughts and choosing quiet times to be still and present.





# *Final* WORDS

Understandably, competitive organisations will likely target performance improvement when they commission mindfulness-based wellbeing programmes. That's the mindfulness teacher's brilliant chance to change MINDS—that while wellbeing and performance are both important, it's wiser to change the order of priority. Then it's up to your modelling of compassion to change HEARTS.

STAGE 1 "All life sucks."

STAGE 2 "My life sucks."

STAGE 3 "I'm great and you're not."

STAGE 4 "We're great."

Culture of shared values. The bigger the foe, the more powerful the tribe.

STAGE 5 "Life is great."

Group is in competition **with what's possible, not with another tribe.**

Spiral up and be well.