

Managers Are Trapped in a Performance-Compassion Dilemma

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Executives' most frequent and salient interactions are with stakeholders (shareholders, boards, market analysts, etc.) who hold them accountable for company performance. As a general rule, shareholders and boards don't ask enough questions about how a leader's people are doing.

Moreover, executives are often insulated from the scale and variety of problems faced by junior employees. Even when senior leaders try to seek out information, most employees put on a brave face because they're afraid to show weakness or vulnerability. Top leaders are further handicapped by their own psychology: Research shows that power reduces empathy, which means they identify less with both the frontline employees' challenges and the middle managers who must deal with these issues daily. All these factors converge to produce executives who are highly focused on meeting performance goals and less aware that their performance demands on middle managers are possibly unreasonable given what's happening on the front lines.

Speaking of those front lines, consider the world of the frontline employee. When it comes to the need for compassion, while everyone faces challenges and stressors (mental and physical health, interpersonal dynamics, family obligations, etc.), frontline employees are less likely to have the resources to offload some of those burdens, such as child or elder care or tutoring. In addition, certain stressors (e.g., job security) are likely greater among frontline employees. Additionally, frontline employees' view of their work is likely to be more focused on specific tasks, with a less-clear sense of how their actions affect company performance. Taken together, this means that frontline employees have more stressors, fewer resources to cope with them, and less understanding of how and why their immediate managers' feet are being held to the fire to deliver results.

How can middle managers cope with these competing pressures?

Focus on two sets of actions. First, work to increase the organization's "compassion capacity" — that is, help equip both senior executives and employees to shoulder more of the burden in delivering compassion so that it doesn't fall entirely on you. Second, work with both executives and employees to lower the perceived pressure of performance demands.

Work with executives to increase compassion and change the performance dialogue

It's our experience that most executives would be willing to demonstrate more compassion and better support their employees if they understood their problems better. So, middle managers' first step in getting top leaders to share the responsibility of delivering compassionate leadership is to educate them, both by sharing data (i.e., "tell" them about the problem) and getting them to experience some of the issues directly (i.e., "show" them the problem).



“**Tell**” is about fixing the information flow by making top leaders aware of the extent of the problem, what frontline employees are experiencing, and how it affects middle managers. We find that bringing some very basic data to the table — such as how many people are experiencing hardships, what kinds of hardships, and what they need in order to cope — makes all the difference. In support of that, middle managers can use simple pulse surveys to capture people’s engagement, concerns, and stress levels.

“**Show**” recognizes that there is no substitute for firsthand experiences, and we’ve found that leaders are better able to empathize if they personally see and hear about employees’ needs for compassion. This advice goes against the instincts of some middle managers who prefer to buffer those conversations between their direct reports and their own manager so they can control the narrative. Other middle managers simply don’t want to bother their leaders with this kind of detail. But if you facilitate skip-level contacts and put top leaders in direct contact with employees — for example, through informal coffee chats — then the executives are much better equipped to empathize and then to help in creating solutions.

Before taking either approach, recognize that framing is very important; if not managed well, this can appear like a post-hoc excuse for missing performance targets. Make it clear that you realize it’s naïve to think an organization can take away performance pressure (or that it would want to). Instead, help senior leaders reframe compassion as a performance imperative — something that will significantly improve performance now and especially in the long term. One simple trick to avoid the excuse framing is to bring these challenges to the table before any negative performance effects emerge.

