

Leader Behaviour in the Face of Suffering: Exploring the Impact of Compassion and Non-
Compassion Through Narrative Inquiry

by

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to the memory of my loving parents, Camilo do Espirito Santo Ribeiro and Maria da Ascensao Moreira Ribeiro, who I miss so much every single day. I will always be grateful for your unconditional love and support, something I only truly appreciated and fully understood after I lost you both.

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Abstract

This qualitative study seeks to explore the impact of compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour in response to suffering in medium to large organizations in Canada and the US using narrative inquiry. Compassion is not a topic that is typically discussed or researched within the context of private, or publicly traded, for-profit, organizations, which tend to focus on maximizing the bottom line and quantifying as much as possible for efficiency. The research questions of this study are as follows: What are recipient stories of perceived compassionate and non-compassionate behaviour by leaders in corporate workplace settings, and how do recipients make meaning of perceived compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour in response to their suffering? Twelve participants shared two stories each—one of compassionate leader behaviour and one of non-compassionate leader behaviour—for a total of 24 narratives. A focus group was also conducted virtually with participants to share preliminary findings. The key findings of compassionate leader behaviour narratives included positive perception of self and work, loyalty towards leader, and examples of the generative nature of compassion in the workplace. In contrast, the key findings of non-compassionate leader behaviour included prolonged suffering, feeling raw and visceral emotions, impact on mental and physical health, disillusionment with leader and organization, and work-home boundary infringement. Two key findings identified across both categories included the presence of reflection and reframing of experiences, and growth as a leader from compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour. Recommendations for future research and organizational practice are discussed.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Compassion is not a topic that is typically discussed or researched within the context of the business world. When we think of private or publicly traded, for-profit, organizations, we expect to hear about maximizing the bottom line and quantifying as much as possible for efficiency. Although compassion research has blossomed in the past 20 years, scholars and practitioners have only scratched the surface of what it means for leaders to be compassionate in the workplace—there is still much research to be done (Dutton & Workman, 2011; Frost, 1999; Kanov et al., 2004; Worline & Dutton, 2017a). In certain professions, or industries, such as healthcare and education for example, where being compassionate is an explicit value, we expect to hear of compassion in these workplaces (Barsade & O’Neill, 2014). Discussing compassion in corporate settings tends to make people uncomfortable, and so it is often avoided. Banker and Bhal (2020) noted, since most of the research on compassion is limited to the health care industry, there is a considerable gap in understanding compassion in business organizations.

Much of my 30-year career was spent working in Information Technology within large publicly traded companies, and perhaps this is the reason I have an overwhelming desire to bring this research into the corporate world. My observations are that compassion is very rarely discussed or displayed, if at all, in corporate workplace settings and when there is suffering in the workplace, it is often ignored. As M.-D. P. Lee (2018) indicated, “To be compassionate leaders, managers must be intentional about giving attention to people’s worries and pains and be willing to be involved in addressing their suffering” (p. 27). If we truly understood the impact that both compassionate and non-compassionate actions by leaders have on individuals in the workplace, organizations might be more receptive to fostering compassion.

The world of work has changed drastically over the past 100 years, and more so since the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic became a reality. At the start of the Industrial Revolution, factories were built to provide mass quantities of goods at lower prices. For this to happen in an efficient manner, the assembly line came into existence and scientific management, or Taylorism, was born (Weisbord, 2012). Since then, North American white-collar professionals have become accustomed to being employed full-time, many with the same organization, and being able to support their families with a decent living wage. Over the past 50 or 60 years, the global economy shifted from manufacturing to a knowledge economy where data and information have become important for acquiring competitive advantage. At the same time, the rise of the gig economy encouraged organizations to hire contractors rather than full-time employees, citing budgetary considerations as the primary reason. This shift in how we work has witnessed more people working from home than ever before, where the blending of personal and professional has made it challenging to separate those two areas of our lives. At the start of the pandemic in March 2020, many organizations were forced to close their offices and, for the first time ever, supported their knowledge workers in continuing to do their jobs from home. At the writing of this dissertation in April 2023, many organizations in Canada are still supporting their employees as they work from home more than 2 years later. Some industries, such as finance and education for example, were forced into a situation where significant resources were utilized to ramp up quickly from a technology perspective in order to survive in this new reality.

If the past almost 3 years of the COVID-19 global pandemic has taught us anything, it is that our work and personal lives have become more intertwined than ever. We can no longer leave our personal lives behind as we start work for the day or night. Throughout this pandemic,

many of us have dealt with illness and death; we have worked from home; we have homeschooled our children; and we have spent countless hours in virtual meetings. If this is not a call for leaders to notice suffering and respond with compassion, I do not know what is.

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore stories of leader behaviour that demonstrated compassion and non-compassion in privately held or publicly traded, for-profit medium to large organizations in Canada and the United States (US). My research questions are as follows:

1. What are recipient stories of perceived compassionate and non-compassionate behaviour by leaders in corporate workplace settings?
2. How do recipients make meaning of perceived compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour in response to their suffering?

My observations and experience in the corporate world over a 30-year period, as an employee, contractor, and leader, have led me to believe that there is impact to employees who have experienced both compassion and non-compassion by their leaders in the workplace. There is an abundance of research that demonstrates the benefits to practising compassion in the workplace (Frost, 1999; Frost et al., 2006; Lilius et al., 2012; Worline & Dutton, 2017a), yet there needs to be further exploration into what the impact is to recipients, specifically how recipients of compassion and non-compassion make meaning of leader behaviour in response to recipient suffering, and what shifts or changes as a result of these behaviours. Lilius et al. (2003) indicated, “Compassion at work is more than simply a momentary and humane response to pain; it also fosters important outcomes and leaves its imprint on the organizational landscape” (p. 33). As a leader, I have observed first-hand how acts of compassion and non-compassion impact

recipients. It is important to explore how recipients make meaning of these acts of compassion and non-compassion, and what shifts or changes for the recipients as a result. M.-D. P. Lee (2018) stated future research “can further explore how the meaning of compassion is constructed in organization[s] not just from the compassion-giver’s perspective but also from the compassion recipient’s perspective” (p. 30). Coming from a constructivist perspective, this is partially what my research has addressed.

I have approached this research using narrative inquiry to tell participants’ stories, and I also included my story as it is interwoven with this research and stems from a place of personal and professional growth. I am aware that my positionality in conducting this research comes with bias, yet it also comes with deep resonance, wisdom, and experiential knowledge. My approach incorporated reflexive activities such as journaling, movement, and meditation to ensure that I was exploring this research topic with an open mind.

This first chapter provided a brief introduction to this study, in addition to my research questions. Chapter 2 provides an extensive literature review exploring the salient concepts of compassion and leader behaviour. Chapter 3 examines the methodological approach I have chosen for this research, as well as how the data analysis was conducted and a discussion of ethical considerations. In what might be considered a departure from traditional formatting, this dissertation contains two chapters that explore and discuss findings (I provide further justification for this in Chapter 3). To honour participants’ voices and narratives, Chapter 4 provides summarized versions of each story as narrated in the one-on-one interviews. Following this, I discuss the key findings in detail from the data analysis in Chapter 5. Finally, Chapter 6

links the key findings to existing scholarly literature and, in addition, I offer recommendations for future research and organizational practice, as well as conclusions based on my findings.

In the next chapter of this dissertation, I discuss some of the salient academic research with respect to compassion in the workplace.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In the following literature review, I examine compassion and leader behaviour.

Compassion is defined, followed by an exploration of leader behaviour.

Compassion

Compassion is a term we intuitively believe we understand, yet when we delve into academic research conducted on compassion over the past 20 to 30 years, a clearer definition emerges (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Goetz & Simon-Thomas, 2017; Worline & Dutton, 2017a). When we think of compassion, the lay person may not differentiate it from other concepts such as empathy, kindness, gratitude, and happiness (Worline & Dutton, 2017a). Although there is some relationship between these concepts, compassion is notably “more than an emotion; it is a felt and enacted desire to alleviate suffering” (Worline & Dutton, 2017a, p. 5). Unlike kindness and gratitude, compassion is a paradoxical emotion because—while it can create feelings of fulfilment and connection—it also evokes necessary discomfort through suffering by “opening us up to the dark side of life” (Itzvan et al., 2016, p. 135). The definition of compassion is typically agreed upon by scholars as consisting of feelings and a response (Atkins & Parker, 2012), although Worline and Dutton (2017a) have more specifically defined compassion as a four-step process that involves the following: “(1) noticing that suffering is present in an organization, (2) making meaning of the suffering ..., (3) feeling empathic concern for the people suffering, and (4) taking action to alleviate suffering” (p. 5). There, of course, are other definitions of compassion in the literature. For example, Goetz and Simon-Thomas (2017) put forward a definition of compassion similar to Worline and Dutton’s (2017a) definition; however, their definition appears to be based in neurological awareness and responses as follows:

1. Awareness of an antecedent (i.e., suffering or need in another individual);
2. Feeling “moved” ...;
3. Appraisal of ...[self], social role, and abilities within the context of the suffering;
4. Judgements about the person who is suffering and the situational context; and
5. Engagement of neural systems that drive social affiliation and caregiving, and motivate helping. (Goetz & Simon-Thomas, 2017, p. 3)

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will be referring to Worline and Dutton’s (2017a) definition of compassion for several reasons. First, it would be very difficult to measure engagement of neural systems but, more importantly, Worline and Dutton’s (2017a) definition is powerful yet easily understood, and it is widely cited.

A discussion on compassion is not complete without reflecting on the concept of human suffering. There has been much philosophizing about human suffering through the ages, as well as across religions and disciplines; however, this report will discuss suffering within the context of compassion. The term compassion is composed of the Latin root *passio* (which means to suffer) and the Latin prefix *com* (which means together)—to suffer together (Lilius et al., 2012). Lilius et al. (2012) noted,

Suffering is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of unpleasant subjective experiences including physical and emotional pain, trauma, psychological distress, and existential anguish, and feelings of disconnection that may be triggered by the occurrence of certain events or circumstances. (p. 274)

Worline and Dutton (2017a) stated, “Compassion always unfolds in relation to suffering” (p. 5) and this is what differentiates compassion from other similar emotions such as kindness and

empathy. Although we often recognize suffering in our personal lives, we may not always notice suffering in the workplace. Dutton et al. (as cited in Frost, 1999) discovered that suffering in the workplace is tied to events that ignore, undermine, or demean our worth as human beings. Regardless of where the suffering occurs, it is often difficult to compartmentalize it in such a way so that it does not follow us into the workplace. As such, suffering in the workplace, regardless of whether it originates at home or at work, has impact in organizations; therefore, some understanding of suffering and the impact of compassion and non-compassion by leaders are concepts that need to be more fully explored (Frost, 1999; Lilius et al., 2012).

Compassion has been shown to have evolutionary and neurological benefits (Carter et al., 2017) as well as organizational performance benefits (Cameron, 2017). In addition, industry-specific research has demonstrated the need for more compassion in the workplace (Cullinan et al., 2020; Lilius et al., 2012; Shea & Lionis, 2017). In health care, for example, Shea and Lionis (2017) noted an increase in initiatives to incorporate compassion in health care and emphasized that this momentum must be maintained in addition to the introduction of compassionate care training. This indicates that in some professions, there is recognition that compassion is important, and effort is being expended to foster this important work. In more traditional corporate settings, we know that employee grief, as well as job stress and burnout, costs organizations hundreds of millions of dollars (Lilius et al., 2012) and this does not consider relatively new forms of suffering from workplace bullying, incivility, and countless other microaggressions that are only now being more widely discussed in academic literature. Cullinan et al. (2020) estimated that bullying costs the Irish economy approximately €239.3 million annually in the public and private sectors. Imagine if this estimate could be extrapolated to assess

the impact of bullying on the global economy! Aside from the significant economic costs of bullying and other compassionless actions in the workplace, more importantly there is the health and wellness impact on organizations and employees that manifests as stress and a variety of physical issues, as well as absenteeism and low employee engagement (Sheehan & Griffiths, 2011).

Now that compassion has been defined and the importance of compassion explored, the following section will discuss leader behaviour and how this might relate to compassion and non-compassion in the workplace.

Leader Behaviour

Much has been written on leadership theory and the evolution of leadership as the workplace continues to evolve to keep pace with societal shifts; however, little has been written about how leaders behave in the presence of suffering in the workplace. Academic and business literature has focused on what constitutes heroic leadership and, until very recently, the emphasis of great leadership was often described as demonstrating organizational effectiveness and efficiency (Bass, 2008; Daft, 2018; Grint, 2011; Yukl, 2013). Great leadership was more about organizational metrics and building high-functioning teams than creating healthy workplaces and meaningful work. Over the past 20 years, there has been increased discussion of leading with the heart, not just the mind (Kouzes & Posner, 2010, 2012). Topics such as transformational leadership, resonant leadership, servant leadership and compassion have helped to bring a more holistic and human view of leadership into academic research (Barling, 2014; Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Goleman et al., 2002; Yukl, 2013), hence my interest is in how leaders in corporate workplace settings behave when employees are suffering. How leaders behave and

what actions they take or fail to take in the face of suffering and how these actions are experienced by the recipients, is important to explore.

Academic research on leader behaviour began in the early 1950s to more closely examine what leaders do rather than who they are (Daft, 2018; Yukl, 2013). Some of the research conducted was concerned with how leaders spent their time, while other research investigated how leaders coped with demands, constraints, and stress (Yukl, 2013). Before long, leadership research was expanded to “determine how effective leaders differ in their behavior from ineffective ones” (Daft, 2018, p. 18). Research on leader behaviour differed from earlier scholarly work exploring trait theories of leadership, which examined whether leaders had specific traits, attributes, or characteristics that differentiated them from those not in leadership positions in organizations (Daft, 2018; Yukl, 2013). In the decades that followed, academic research evolved to take into account contextual and situational variables, as well as relational and integrative aspects of leadership (Daft, 2018; Yukl, 2013). In other words, scholars shifted from focusing on leader behaviour to contemplating a more holistic view of leadership styles, motivation, and collaboration. Despite this shift in research, leader behaviour continues to be important since, as Bennis (2009) noted, “we base our judgments of people on extremely thin slices of behavior” (p. 312). Worline and Dutton (2017a) reinforced this observation by stating, “When leaders fail to acknowledge suffering, the silence often leaves the members of an organization uncertain about how to interpret and handle difficult situations” (p. 216). This aligns with the old saying “actions speak louder than words”—what a leader does or how they behave lets followers know whether they are truly supported.

Leader behaviour does not occur in a vacuum: action, or inaction, is often the manifestation of one's feelings, values, beliefs, motivation, and situational variables (Banker & Bhal, 2020; Bushe, 2010; Campbell, 2017; Yukl, 2013; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Viera-Armas, 2019). Banker and Bhal (2020) noted that whether managers in business organizations decide to help someone who is suffering "depends on their conceptualization and construction of the term 'compassion'" (p. 264) in addition to existing organizational values. Goetz et al. (2010) stated whether someone acts compassionately toward another depends on the outcome of a cost-benefit analysis shaped by "(a) the relevance of the sufferer to the self, (b) the sufferer's deservingness of help, and (c) the individual's ability to cope with the situation at hand" (p. 356). What becomes clear from this research is that leader behaviour can be highly variable and difficult to explain. Many factors can play a role as to whether a leader decides to behave compassionately or not at any given time.

Although Yukl (2013) stated, "More research has been conducted on leader activities and behavior than on any other aspect of leadership" (p. 405). I have found recent research on leader behaviour is scarce, especially with respect to compassion. Some examples of the keywords and phrases I used to search include compassionate leader behaviour/behavior, compassion and leaders, and leader behaviours/behaviors in the workplace. Databases I searched include primarily the Royal Roads University Library Discovery system, which is a broad interdisciplinary search tool, Google Scholar, and specific databases such as ProQuest and the Psychology Database at ProQuest. Even after performing this extensive search in a variety of databases, I found that much of the academic literature focuses on leader behaviour in connection to other concepts such as ethical leadership, leadership style, leader motivation and

leader power (Almeida et al., 2021; Foulk et al., 2018; Jit et al., 2017; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Viera-Armas, 2019). As readers will see in the final chapter, there are also bodies of literature outside of leader behaviour that relate to this study's findings. However, I have yet to find scholarly literature that specifically discusses how individuals in corporate workplace settings experience and make meaning of compassionate and non-compassionate behaviour by their leaders in response to their suffering, which is therefore one of the key contributions of this research. Theoretically, this research expands the field of organizational leadership studies, building on the burgeoning literature of compassion in the workplace. From a practical perspective, it gives leaders tools and insights into their behaviour in responding to suffering in corporate workplace settings. Why is this important and how does this make our workplaces better? The literature on compassion in the workplace has contributed greatly to our understanding of how leaders can alleviate suffering and how individual compassion can become collective compassion within organizations over time. What is missing from the literature is a good understanding of how individuals interpret and make meaning of both compassionate and non-compassionate behaviour by their leaders. Without a good understanding of what suffering feels like and how to define it, as well as what the short- and long-term impacts are to recipients, it becomes challenging to talk about compassion in organizations and the tangible impact that leaders have on subordinates through their actions. In our post-pandemic world, at a time when we are seeing less engagement in workplaces and an increase in phenomena such as "quiet quitting" (Johnson, 2023, p. 1) in organizations (see also Mahand & Caldwell, 2023)—not to mention how leadership on the global stage has become increasingly divisive along race, class, gender, religion, and partisan lines—responding with compassion at an organizational level starts

with understanding what that means at an individual level. As I demonstrate in Chapter 6, there are real, tangible impacts to compassion and non-compassion in the workplace. This study can support leaders in beginning to truly understand the impact of their behaviour, which, hopefully, will bring about a desire to change.

This literature review has explored some salient concepts of compassion, in addition to determining a definition of compassion I utilized in this doctoral research. Academic literature on leader behaviour was also examined, specifically with respect to its highly variable and complex nature. As will be discussed in the next chapter in the section on participants, my dissertation addressed leader behaviour from the perspective of followers only. This means I did not recruit their leaders to hear the other side of the story, so to speak. Focusing on followers was important for two reasons: first, I wanted to better understand how followers interpreted and made meaning of leader behaviour, both positive and negative; second, as Kouzes and Posner (2012) noted, “Leaders’ deeds are far more important than their words” (p. 17); hence, leader actions can be powerful for followers (Schein & Schein, 2017). Considering that some followers will go on to become leaders, exploring how recipients made meaning of compassionate and non-compassionate actions by their leaders and, in some cases, integrated lessons learned into their own approaches to leadership yielded powerful insights.

Having grounded this research in literature that directly relates to leader compassion and non-compassion in the face of suffering, I turn now to an overview of this study’s methodological framing.

Chapter Three: Methodology

When I began my doctoral journey in 2015, I would have said that my worldview leaned toward pragmatism. I was working full-time in a corporate leadership position, and I had witnessed many opportunities to explore solutions to real world problems (Creswell & Poth, 2018). At that time, I was unaware that there might be differing realities or that realities could be co-created between individuals. For many reasons, I now find myself holding more of a social constructivist worldview because my life journey for the past 8 years has been about finding meaning in my new identity and in dealing with personal loss, as well as learning how to tell my story so that it is relatable to others.

Creswell and Poth (2018) describe the social constructivist framework as one where “multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others” (p. 35). This would suggest that there is not one true reality, but many different realities (C.-G. L. Lee, 2012). When a life event occurs, we strive to find meaning in the event and understand why it happened. My worldview, although it leans toward the social constructivist paradigm, suggests that there is one reality (for example, a death or a divorce) but many interpretations of that event depending on our experiences and background. This was reinforced by Langley (2021), who noted, “Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction” (p. 253). Creswell and Creswell (2018) in summarizing Crotty’s (1998) work noted three assumptions in discussing constructivism: (a) we construct meaning as we engage with the world we live in, (b) we make sense of our world based on our historical and social perspectives, and (c) “the basic generation of meaning is always social, arising in and out of interaction with a human community” (p. 8). My story of the absence of leader compassion is an example of how different

interpretations of reality do, in fact, exist and that they are influenced by, not only our identities, but also by our social relationships with others. The event itself—that I was dismissed from an organization—happened: there is no disputing that; however, my interpretation of the event was vastly different from my colleagues’ interpretation. What made these two interpretations so different was my story around the event, as well as my identity and experiences that determined the emotions I felt and continue to feel.

Given that stories play an important role with respect to sensemaking in the social constructivist worldview, it would logically follow that the approach to inquiry is largely inductive within this realm and consists of a more literary style of writing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hence, I have chosen narrative inquiry as the methodological approach for this research (which will be discussed in more depth in the “Methodology” section) and my story was included in the data collection for several reasons. The primary reason for including my story is that it has informed my social constructivist worldview and speaks to who I am as a scholar. Second, part of being a narrative inquirer (and, I would argue, astute researcher) is to practice reflexive writing and critically examine whether biases and assumptions are influencing my interpretation of the findings. As Holmes (2020) emphasized, “Reflexivity informs positionality” (p. 2), and this is supported by Creswell and Poth (2018) who noted that it is important for researchers to situate themselves within the study to “reflect his or her history, culture, and personal experiences” (p. 49). Harvey (2013) indicated, as researchers, it is important to consider our own identity and acknowledge the impact we have on research. As much as we might like to think phenomena or events can be observed objectively, Langley (2021) noted we, as researchers, are inevitably “living forward in time along with those [we] are

interacting with” (p. 255). Finally, there can be a sense of freedom in sharing a painful story and relegating it to the past. Glesne (2011) stated there is a therapeutic aspect to the interview process, specifically “the unburdening effect of the respondents’ saying safely whatever it is they feel” (p. 123). I considered introducing an autoethnographic component to this research by allowing my story to stand on its own rather than including it with my participants’ stories; however, I decided against this for several reasons. First, my story is no more important than my participants’ stories; therefore, allowing my story to stand alone implicitly implies this notion. Second, highlighting my story separate from my participants’ stories did not feel like a psychologically safe option for me in that I wanted to remain anonymous in the same way I had protected my participants’ identities. Having said that, although this is not typically a goal of dissertation writing, significant healing has come from sharing my story with others, and in knowing that I am not alone on this journey of fostering leader compassion in the workplace and emphasizing its importance.

Methodology

As noted above, this qualitative research project was conducted using narrative inquiry as the guiding methodology. Narrative inquiry as described by Clandinin (2013) is “an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (p. 17). A connection between the narrative inquirer and participants is created that I consider to be sacred—in which life stories are shared, and space is held to fully hear the stories being told. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained while the narrative inquirer must become fully involved in their participants’ stories, there is a tension to also “step back and see their own stories in the inquiry, the stories of the participants, as well

as the larger landscape on which they all live” (p. 81). The reason for choosing narrative inquiry speaks to the uniqueness and profound impact that stories of compassion and non-compassion have on people’s lives. Sharing these stories not only allows for a deeper exploration of impact of leader behaviour on recipients but, more importantly, reveals the meaning that recipients make of their leader’s actions in the face of suffering. Using this framework to capture rich narrative is important to encourage participants to tell their stories and be heard through this research project in the hope that organizational leaders might choose compassion as a response to suffering more often.

Data Collection Methods

There were two methods of data collection employed in this research. One method provided an opportunity for participants to orally tell their story in a one-on-one interview. Interviews are an important method of data collection in narrative inquiry, as well as other qualitative research approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glesne, 2011; Scott & Garner, 2013). The interviews were semi-structured with several fixed questions; however, many of the questions following this were fluid depending on what was co-created with each participant. There were some guiding questions, but I was also able to gently probe, as appropriate (see Appendix A). In total, 12 interviews were conducted virtually over Zoom from January 30, 2022, to March 18, 2022. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using a professional transcription service.

A second method of data collection, and validation, in the form of a focus group with the interviewees was conducted virtually via Zoom on March 15, 2022, with seven participants attending. As with the interviews, the focus group was recorded and transcribed using a

professional transcription service. The use of focus groups in qualitative research has grown in the past 30 years, though it existed previously in marketing research (Morgan, 1997). Luke and Goodrich (2019) commented, although focus groups are typically used as a triangulation method in qualitative research, scholars have recently advocated for focus groups to be used as a research tool on its own. There are benefits to using focus groups such as the shared space and learning that is co-created in a group versus one-on-one interviews (Luke & Goodrich, 2019); however, there are also specific ethical issues such as consent in a group, confidentiality and anonymity, and risk of harm, all of which were appropriately mitigated in this study (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). In this case, the focus group was a forum to provide aggregated themes back to the interviewees while allowing participants to validate research findings (see Appendix B). In addition, the focus group allowed participants to collectively co-create new meaning around the concepts of compassion and non-compassion. Finally, the focus group environment was beneficial for interviewees as a way to share further information that may not have been provided through the interview process, and potentially provide closure. According to the literature, the ideal size of a focus group should be six to ten participants (Glesne, 2011; Morgan, 1997; Scott & Garner, 2013) which worked well since seven participants (who had previously participated in interviews) joined the focus group. The telling of stories that highlight the actions and words of a leader who was not compassionate, indifferent, or even nasty, can be triggering to participants. The focus group helped alleviate some of the psychological pain experienced by participants who shared stories that were absent in compassion. Finally, the sharing of positive stories of compassion in the workplace provided a glimmer of hope to participants that compassion in the workplace is possible.

In addition to using narrative inquiry, I included my story as a participant. I had two choices for how to accomplish this: I could have written my story from memory, or I could ask a colleague to interview me in the same manner that I interviewed participants. There were advantages and disadvantages to both, not the least of which is the dreaded anticipation of the suffering associated with reliving my story if I chose to be interviewed. Writing would have been much easier, and so this is why it was important for me to be interviewed by a colleague as a participant so as to put myself in the shoes of a participant before reaching out to others. Being interviewed takes courage because, as a participant, there is vulnerability in telling a potentially personal story. For me, there was shame in telling the story of how I was dismissed from an organization that I loved being part of and poured myself into. This feeling of shame is exactly why it was important for me to be interviewed since writing would not be as impactful to me and this important research. As Brown (2010) stated, “Shame hates it when we reach out and tell our story; it hates having words wrapped around it—it can’t survive being shared” (p. 9). It was essential that I experience what my participants may have been feeling, and, in keeping with the true nature of narrative inquiry, it was crucial that a sacred space was co-created between myself, as the participant, and my colleague, as the interviewer. I then endeavoured to create this sacred space when I went on to conduct interviews with others.

Sampling Procedures and Recruitment

Since I have a robust professional network on various social media platforms, I recruited participants via LinkedIn. There was sufficient interest from my initial outreach to colleagues, so there was no need to cross-post to my professional Facebook page, although I had been cleared to do so through the Royal Roads University ethics office. My approach to this research

consisted of convenience sampling plus some purposive sampling. The criteria for selection were as follows:

- Participants must be willing to share two stories that they deem important, one each of perceived compassionate and non-compassionate actions by their leader; and
- These stories or events must have taken place when they were employed in a for-profit, privately held or publicly traded, medium to large organization in Canada or the US.

I created a list of potential participants from my network on LinkedIn and then sent an email to each potential participant, explaining the study and providing an overview of the interview process (see Appendix C). Participants who were interested in participating responded back via email. Once a response was received, I emailed a consent form to the potential participant and a date was scheduled for the interview to take place (see Appendix D). Completed and signed consent forms were returned to me via email from participants prior to conducting interviews.

With respect to sample size and how I determined saturation, there is ongoing discussion in the academic literature that questions whether saturation is a valid measure for all forms of qualitative research (Malterud et al., 2016; Saunders et al., 2018). Saturation is a concept that was introduced with grounded theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to determine when it was appropriate to stop sampling (Saunders et al., 2018). Given that grounded theory by its nature is iterative, the conversation around saturation was most concerned with theoretical saturation more so than data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). Over the years, saturation has become “the most touted guarantee of qualitative rigor offered by authors ... yet it is the one we know least about”

(Morse, 2015, p. 578). Over time, saturation appears to have shifted from theoretical saturation to thematic or data saturation in qualitative research; however, its applicability has not been called into question (Hennink et al., 2017; Thorne, 2020).

Saturation has been applied to most, if not all, qualitative methods; however, scholars have either not been transparent with how saturation was determined, or it has been applied inconsistently (Malterud et al., 2016). Saunders et al. (2018) suggested it “is less straightforward to identify a role for saturation in qualitative approaches that are based on a biographical or narrative approach to analysis, or that, more generally, include a specific focus on accounts of *individual* informants” (p. 1989). Some researchers have stated that sample size is not an issue in qualitative research, though it is related to validity and is, therefore, important (Boddy, 2016) since it speaks to the quality of the research (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012). To say there is little guidance on determining saturation in qualitative research, specifically narrative inquiry, would be an understatement.

Narrative inquiry is not about generalizability, but about depth and richness in participant stories; therefore, the question remains how to determine when saturation has been reached. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of qualitative research articles to attempt to determine saturation. In the findings, they discovered that data saturation could be achieved with nine to 17 interviews or four to eight focus groups. Boddy (2016) indicated it is possible to have a sample size that is too large and suggested a qualitative sample size of more than 30 interviews becomes “too unwieldy to administer and analyze” (p. 429). I was initially aiming to interview 10 participants, however, in the end I recruited 11 participants (plus my interview for a total of 12 participants) because one participant responded to my request later than anticipated

and was very interested in contributing to this research. I asked each participant to provide two stories: one each of compassion and non-compassion. I then invited all interview participants, except one whose interview was delayed, to the focus group.

The guidance on saturation described above helped me to determine whether 10 interviews was sufficient or whether I should invite more interview participants to round out the narratives. Within the realm of narrative inquiry, 10 participants may seem high; however, because I asked for two stories per participant that took place in a finite timeframe, as opposed to life stories, this was achievable.

There is little guidance in the literature that describes what constitutes a story in narrative inquiry. Narrative researchers tend to avoid being prescriptive about how to do narrative inquiry; even Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated the “intention is to come to the ‘definition’ of narrative inquiry slowly in this volume by ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’ what narrative inquirers do” (p. 20). It is important, however, to be clear about what constitutes a story for my research. Emden (1998) described a story for the purpose of their research as a “single narration or account that provides meaning to the past events and actions of a person’s life ... whether ... these are true or imagined” (p. 35). Smith et al. (2022) discussed the concept of experiences rather than stories within the realm of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as follows:

IPA is concerned with human lived experience, and posits that experience can be understood via an examination of the meanings which people impress upon it. These meanings, in turn, may illuminate the embodied, cognitive-affective and existential domains of psychology. People are physical and psychological entities. They do things in

the world, they reflect on what they do, and those actions have meaningful, existential consequences. (p. 29)

Taking both conceptualizations into account, my research defined a story or experience as a unit of analysis that begins with an event that triggers suffering as described by a participant followed by how their leader responded to the event and their subsequent suffering. The story concluded with the participant discussing how they made meaning of their leader's actions in response to their suffering.

Ethical Considerations

In Canada, the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR] et al., 2018) is a joint initiative between three federal research agencies. CIHR et al. (2018) has adopted this policy as a way for researchers to comply with the highest ethical standards when conducting research that involves humans. The mandate of this policy is based on the core principles of “respect for persons, concern for welfare, [and] justice” (CIHR et al., p. 6). How I have addressed these three core principles in my research is explored in the following discussion.

Respect for Persons

According to CIHR et al.'s (2018) *Tri-Council Policy Statement*, respect for persons involves recognizing the “intrinsic value of human beings and the respect and consideration that they are due” (p. 6). An important component of this is that participants have autonomy in choosing to participate in research or to decline participation at any time. The choice to participate in this research or consent to participate, but then decline at any time, was reflected in the letter of invitation to participate and in the informed consent to participate in an interview

and the focus group. The population that my research targeted is not a vulnerable population; therefore, participants had autonomy to decline participation at any point in time throughout this study.

Concern for Welfare

Concern for welfare addresses the impact that research may have on potential participants' physical, mental, or spiritual health (CIHR et al., 2018). Throughout this project, I addressed stories of compassion within organizations, and I did not collect data related to any personal experiences from participants that could potentially impact their welfare. In terms of participant privacy, the informed letter of consent was provided to participants to clearly outline how privacy was addressed, how the research data was stored, and the security measures that were put into place to protect electronic, hard copy, and audio-recorded information. Participants were advised that the findings were to be presented in an aggregated and anonymous fashion to protect individual and personal identities.

Justice

Justice refers to treating people fairly and equitably, although not always treating them in the same way (CIHR et al., 2018). To ensure that participants tell their stories in a way that is most comfortable to them, there were multiple forms of data collection. Participants were interviewed to tell their stories orally. In addition, all participants were invited to attend a focus group where aggregated themes from the data analysis were presented and discussed. This approach demonstrated the benefits of considering different perspectives, allowing the process to be iterative, and identifying common themes across the stories while still conveying the

humanity that comes from sharing stories of compassion, or the absence of compassion, in the workplace.

Although the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (CIHR et al., 2018) was adhered to as this research proposal was reviewed by the Research Ethics Board at Royal Roads University, there was more to consider than applying for ethics approval. Inherently, a scholar practitioner should continually be asking the question, “What am I doing, or how am I presenting information, that may have unintended consequences?” As mentioned in a previous section, journaling was a key component of the research design, but it also served as a space for me to become aware and explore any ethical situations that may have arisen before any harm is inflicted. Trust is a crucial part of being transparent and ensuring participants that every effort was made to ensure that there was no power over concerns, no perceived or actual conflicts of interest, and that confidentiality was guaranteed.

Although I was focused on collecting stories of compassion in the workplace, which is generally considered positive, some stories emerged that highlighted instances of the absence of compassion, and this may have been an emotional trigger to some participants. To address this, I followed up with all participants after interviewing was completed, and again via email several days after the interview. To my knowledge, no participants required mental health intervention, though contact information for local mental health agencies was offered. I did not encounter any ethical considerations outside of what is outlined in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (CIHR et al., 2018). The population I researched was not vulnerable, they were free to participate or opt out at any time, and no one was identified or quoted without permission.

There is another facet of ethics that must be considered with narrative inquiry, which goes beyond the core principles set out by the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (CIHR et al., 2018), and that is relational ethics. Leahy (2021) called this “subtle ethics’: the ways in which ethical concerns infuse the unofficial aspects of qualitative research” (p. 2). As mentioned above, there is a sacredness in the telling of stories that brings people together into a relationship of sorts. Stories are often more powerful than we realize and, “as researchers, we need to understand the ways in which stories function in people’s day-to-day living” (Clandinin et al., 2018, p. 2). This relationship that is formed between the storyteller and receivers creates an intimate space in which, as researchers, it behooves us to take care of the stories in a way that honours the storyteller. In addition, the receiving of stories often prompts us to look closely at who we are as scholars and, in doing so, creates an opportunity to be reflexive. As Clandinin et al. (2018) stated, “Relational ethics live at the heart of narrative inquiry; they direct authors to see ethical actions as situated within, and central to, relationships with participants” (p. 1). Much of this ontological thinking is shaped by Indigenous scholars (Clandinin et al., 2018) and was vital to this research project.

Data Analysis

I asked each participant to tell two stories: one of compassionate leader behaviour and one of non-compassionate leader behaviour. Participants were permitted to choose whether they preferred to start with a story of compassion or non-compassion. Eight participants shared two distinct stories each of compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour, whereas four participants shared one story each that encompassed both compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour. As mentioned, all interviews were held virtually using a paid version of Zoom

and recorded, as was the focus group. Although Zoom does provide some transcription capability, I found it to be lacking for academic purposes; therefore, the audio files were securely uploaded (not emailed) to a professional transcription service (Rev.com) and transcribed into Word documents. All 24 stories are summarized in Chapter 4 of this document.

I analyzed the transcribed interviews using a three-step process. First, I printed the documents and read through several times to enable identification of the general themes of how compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour impacted participants, as well as how participants made meaning of the experiences. The themes derived from this first step are what informed the focus group with participants. Second, I coded all interviews using ATLAS.ti software to help identify major themes across the narratives and compare what was found to the first step of the process. Once I coded all interviews using the software, I reviewed the codes to enable the grouping of similar codes and also delete any duplicates. I created several custom reports in ATLAS.ti to determine which themes were most prevalent within each type of narrative (compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour). Finally, I read through the hard copy documents again with a slightly different perspective to ensure that what was coded using the software was still valid. While the audio file from the focus group was transcribed, I manually coded it once, not using ATLAS.ti, since there was no new information that surfaced in conducting the focus group. Participants agreed with all the preliminary findings, and there was engaging conversation as a result.

As briefly noted in Chapter 1, I chose to separate my findings into two chapters rather than just one in this dissertation. Chapter 4 (Findings – Narrative Analysis) contains summaries of the participant narratives and addresses my first inquiry question, while Chapter 5 (Findings –

Analysis of Narratives) reveals key findings and emerging themes across the narratives and addresses my second inquiry question. Conducting narrative inquiry often involves walking a fine line between honouring each story in its entirety and looking for patterns across the narratives. The justification for taking this approach is two-fold: first, I felt it was vital to honour the voices of my participants in this research by keeping their stories whole, which also emphasizes the richness of narrative inquiry; second, delineating research findings in this manner was noted in a colleague's compelling doctoral dissertation (Page, 2016) and is based on the foundational work of Bruner (1985) and Polkinghorne (1995). Bruner (1985) wrote about two modes of thought that helps us construct reality: one is logico-scientific, or paradigmatic, mode which employs a logical, scientific manner and is often used to categorize or explain a concept or present and test hypotheses or theories. In contrast, the other mode of thought is narrative, which "deals with the vicissitudes of human intentions" (Bruner, 1985, p. 16) and is essentially the skillful art of storytelling, though this is a vast oversimplification of Bruner's work. Bruner (1985) stated, "Efforts to reduce one mode to the other or to ignore one at the expense of the other inevitably fail to capture the rich diversity of thought" (p. 11). In other words, these two modes of thought are complementary, and one cannot be ignored at the expense of the other.

Polkinghorne (1995) developed this concept further in a discussion on narrative inquiry by superimposing Bruner's (1985) work onto the types of narrative inquiry in research. As such, Polkinghorne noted that *narrative analysis* corresponds to Bruner's narrative mode of thought and "is actually a synthesizing of the data rather than a separation of it into its constituent parts" (p. 15), which corresponds to Chapter 4 in this dissertation. In contrast, Polkinghorne's *analysis of narratives* categorization aligns to Bruner's paradigmatic mode of thinking, which includes

“descriptions of themes that hold across the stories” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12) and this corresponds to Chapter 5 in this dissertation. Like Bruner, Polkinghorne (1985) saw both types of narrative inquiry as complementary, which is why I chose to present my findings here in two separate chapters.

This chapter discussed the methodological and ontological approaches I employed in this study. In addition, my data collection and analysis procedures were explained, and an exploration of ethical issues was undertaken. In the next chapter, I present summarized narratives from all participants in this study.

Chapter Four: Findings – Narrative Analysis

A word after a word after a word is power.

— Margaret Atwood, *Margaret Atwood* (Documentary film released in 2019)

In this chapter, I present the participant narratives of perceived leader compassion and non-compassion in the workplace. In addition, I discuss categorization of the narratives as well as leader behaviours described by participants. This responds to my first inquiry question which is: What are recipient stories of perceived compassionate and non-compassionate behaviour by leaders in corporate workplace settings? There is much discussion in the narrative inquiry literature about the challenges of recounting participant stories in a modified or condensed format. It is crucial that stories collected and shared by researchers are told in the participants' voices; however, presenting stories gathered via interviews without some modification is impractical. The length of participant interviews for this research varied from 45 minutes to just over 2 hours; therefore, in the interest of space, each story has been condensed to between 200 and 450 words. I returned the condensed narratives to participants for their review and modified them accordingly. In addition, I removed any names and organizations from the stories to protect participant confidentiality and anonymity, citing randomly generated initials (e.g., A.M. and M.D.) as pseudonyms, which I introduce in the “Narratives of Non-Compassionate Leader Behaviours” section in this chapter.

Types of Participant Stories

Each participant shared two stories during their interview—one of compassionate and one of non-compassionate leader behaviour in response to recipient suffering—for a total of 24 stories. Four participants shared one story that encompassed both compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviours, and eight participants shared two distinct and unrelated stories

of compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviours. At the time the stories occurred, all participants worked for medium to large private or publicly traded organizations in Canada and the US. Some participants were leaders with direct reports, and others were individual contributors. Participants were employed in a broad range of industries such as consulting, professional association management, training, sales, technology, finance, and food services.

The types of stories shared covered a wide range of events that affected participants at work, though not all occurred in the workplace. Story topics that described compassionate leader behaviours included death of a family member, opportunity to grow and learn, recovery from illness or surgery, relocation for family, coping with stressful project deadlines, and acknowledgement of hard work. In contrast, topics that described non-compassionate leader behaviours included death of a co-worker, merger or acquisition, toxic culture, emotional abuse, failure of a product or service, lay-off or termination, and personal boundaries not being respected. All interviews took place virtually using a paid version of Zoom and were recorded for transcription purposes.

It took courage for participants to come forward and agree to share these personal and sometimes heartbreaking stories, and for this I am very grateful. In the next three sections, I will present the condensed narratives that were shared by participants with me, grouped into categories of compassion, non-compassion and both compassion and non-compassion.

Narratives of Non-Compassionate Leader Behaviours

The narratives of non-compassionate leader behaviour that follow provide a window for the reader into the instances of suffering and the corresponding leader behaviour that recipients

encountered in the workplace. Participants are not listed in any specific order, and personal or organizational information has been removed to protect identities.

Participant 1

While in a technology leadership role with responsibility for a large and diverse team, A.M. lost their father after a long and complicated illness. Six weeks later, A.M. was terminated from the organization with no warning or explanation. A.M.'s leader indicated in an email to their team that the reason for termination was performance, which was unsubstantiated with prior feedback. A.M. had endured emotional abuse from this leader for approximately a year prior to the termination. At the time of termination, A.M.'s leader walked into their office telling them this was their last day with the organization, handed them a letter offering severance, and A.M. was immediately escorted from the building. As a result, A.M. secured the services of a lawyer to challenge the conditions of termination. Given that A.M. neither had the opportunity to say goodbye to their team, nor were they offered an explanation for the termination, the email that followed and the ensuing legal action created a situation where A.M. lost self-esteem, felt shame, experienced depression and physical health issues, and struggled to find purposeful employment for a number of years following this incident. A.M. noted,

I was so burnt out from all of this stuff that went on and just never quite got back on my feet. I tie it back to how [this leader] treated me as I left. My self-esteem took a hit. I'll be honest, I was tired; I was burned out and tired and grieving.

Participant 2

M.D. was leading several technology infrastructure teams at a large North American energy company when there was a reorganization. Their leader was terminated as a result, and

M.D. found themselves reporting to a new leader, who had a very different leadership style. M.D.'s previous leader was empathetic and compassionate, leading with a collaborative approach, and openly valued M.D.'s work. M.D.'s new leader preferred to lead by intimidation, often shut down discussions with respect to problem-solving, was distant, and showed little emotion. Eventually, this working relationship caused M.D. to experience stress-related symptoms, such as sleeplessness, and created an environment lacking in psychological safety. Although M.D. did not leave the organization because of this change in leadership, they accepted early retirement because they felt that they were not working to potential and their work was not valued. M.D. stated they "were just trying to survive day by day."

Participant 3

A.D. was in a director position reporting to a senior leader at a large energy company when a co-worker passed away unexpectedly. A.D.'s leader called each member of the team, including A.D. to check in; however, it soon became apparent they were only calling employees because Human Resources (HR) had instructed them to do so. While on the phone, A.D.'s leader stated, "He had no feelings and that this wasn't really impacting him." A.D. indicated to this leader that they "were quite distraught" with the passing of this co-worker; however, A.D.'s leader did not acknowledge their suffering, and promptly ended the call. A.D.'s leader often did not acknowledge others' emotions or suffering in the workplace with respect to this event, so A.D. was not shocked by this reaction, but they were disappointed. A.D. felt "it was to check off boxes" and that it seemed "very strategic and calculated." Consequently, A.D. no longer broached emotional topics with this leader as there was uncertainty in how this leader would react. In addition, A.D. expressed disillusionment with the organization stating, "it maybe soured

me a little bit in the sense that someone could make it that high in the organization without people skills or without sort of advanced people skills.” AD expressed that this leader had “pretty bare, minimum people skills.”

Participant 4

During the time W.S. held a technology director role within a large North American energy company, there was an unexpected network component failure which impacted the transmission of petroleum products, ultimately costing the company a significant amount of money. The decision to not immediately restart the pipeline subsequent to recovering the failed component was made by the engineers responsible for the health of the pipeline for safety reasons. This turned an eight-minute outage, which was within the stated service level agreement, into a 16-hour outage. It became readily apparent to W.S. that the senior leadership team was looking for someone to blame for this outage, even though it was deemed by all involved that this was the safest decision. The leader whom W.S. reported to indicated, “This is just about accountability; somebody just has to answer for this.” W.S. noted, “What ensued was months and months of investigation from the CEO down, months and months of defending this decision, and ultimately, it probably cost two people their jobs, myself and another [person].” W.S. was left to defend themselves and their team; however, they were ultimately punished as was reflected in their annual reviews and year-end bonuses. As W.S. reflected on this time, they stated, “At many points in that process, I found myself just thinking, I have to get out,” as this was taking its toll in the form of physical and emotional stress. Seven months after the incident, W.S. saw an opportunity through restructuring and left the organization after enduring months of criticism and hostility from various senior leaders.

Participant 5

H.K. was an individual contributor on a geographically dispersed team at a large North American energy company. Due to organizational restructuring, the marketing team members based in the US were being laid off and H.K. was on the team responsible for communicating these layoffs. H.K. and several leaders from the team flew to Houston on a Sunday evening, and on Monday morning, “we got everybody into a ballroom in the hotel attached to the big office tower we were in and let everybody go. Everybody. Like in one fell swoop.” The next day, H.K. and the leaders got back on a plane and flew home. The process for laying off these employees, and the subsequent stress that this caused, was never discussed, and no one checked in with H.K. to ask how they were or to discuss what their new responsibilities would be. H.K. noted that the next day they “looked around and thought like, ‘Do I still have a job?’; using my swipe card the next day I’m wondering if I still had a gig.” Although this experience was traumatizing to H.K. and left them thinking, “For the first time I realized, to some extent, you’re a number”; it also provided a learning opportunity for how *not* to manage lay-off situations when H.K. later stepped into senior leadership roles.

Participant 6

B.S. was hired as a general manager of a computer training company. This was a great opportunity for B.S., because it allowed them to move to the US for work, something they had wanted to do for a long time. After about a year of working 6 days a week and very long days, B.S. and their family decided to take a short vacation to Mexico. Two days into their vacation, B.S. received a frantic call from their leader “freaking out” because an employee had quit and demanded that B.S. return to the office immediately. B.S. felt they had no choice but to end their

vacation prematurely and fly back with the family, only to discover the problem was not as urgent as their leader had indicated. This created emotional distress not only for B.S. but also for their family. As a result of this incident, B.S. noted, “What it really did is it just absolutely changed how I felt about him ... [I] never recovered from that ... [it] changed our relationship ... it truly was the trigger for me to figure out, how do I get out of here?” Less than 2 years later, B.S. resigned from the organization as a direct result of this incident.

Participant 7

J.C. was employed at a national food services organization when they were acquired by another company. J.C. was retained in a leadership role to help franchises adapt to the new operating structure that was implemented by the parent company. In an effort to get results quickly, the parent company demanded immediate compliance from franchisees and did not take into consideration the toll this would have on employees. In addition, when leaders did not achieve the results that senior leadership demanded, they were often shamed in meetings. J.C. was in a difficult position since they were expected to ensure that franchisees complied, yet J.C. wanted to do this in a way that also took into account employee well-being. Due to this tension that existed between how quickly the parent company wanted compliance at all costs, and J.C. witnessing the impact on employee health, it created a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety for J.C. and their life partner. As J.C. indicated, “You’re always offloading your stress [at home].” J.C. also noted,

It felt [like] every day you were failing as a leader, you were failing your people; and for me, as a heart-based leader, I didn’t feel I was failing them from a standpoint of giving

them the tools to do their job, I was failing them mental health wise ... I was failing them in helping them create a life that didn't have all this stress in it all the time.

Six months later, J.C. resigned from the organization, stating, "The reason I had to leave is because I couldn't work without passion, I couldn't work without that space where people cared about people."

Participant 8

C.J. was a senior leader at a large North American energy company. When C.J. and their partner were expecting twins, it was decided that C.J. would take a month as parental leave when the twins were approximately 8 months old. This leave was approved by C.J.'s leader and the executive vice president. In the meantime, C.J. developed serious health issues that required surgery and a 6-week recovery. Surgery was scheduled for September and parental leave was approved for July, which meant C.J. would be absent for several consecutive months during a busy time for the senior leadership team. C.J.'s leader soon approached C.J. and asked them to cancel their parental leave in light of this development. C.J. was "shocked and flabbergasted" their leader asked this: "I felt if I compromised on this, it would always be something else and something else and something else." C.J. went on to state, "I got quite upset about this, and in the heat of the moment I quite honestly pushed back" and negotiated a 3-week parental leave rather than 4 weeks. Although C.J. stayed with the organization, this incident caused them to "kind of lose trust in the company" and in the leaders who approached them with this request.

Narratives of Compassionate Leader Behaviours

The above stories of non-compassion offer a window into the types of leader behaviour that can have long-lasting negative impacts on their employees. In contrast, the stories below

demonstrate examples of leaders who demonstrate compassion. These stories have an equally powerful and long-lasting impact while simultaneously supporting employee's confidence, mental health, and overall well-being. The stories of compassion provide inspirational and aspirational insights to leaders by demonstrating what is possible. Participants here are listed in the same order as the section above.

Participant 1

A.M. was leading a team of technologists at a large North American company, when they decided to complete a graduate degree. The coursework for this program was primarily online; however, for 2 weeks each during the first and second years, there was an on-campus portion that was mandatory. A.M.'s leader was very supportive and interested in how A.M. could apply what they learned to the workplace. Throughout the 2-year program, this leader offered A.M. flexibility to attend the on-campus portions of the program without using vacation days and allowed A.M. to implement several leadership initiatives based on learnings from the program. As A.M. stated, "He let me try things; he let me try things that could have failed, and he was okay with it." A.M.'s ideas were received with respect and kindness, and, in addition, this leader often checked in with A.M. to ask how the coursework was going. To this day, A.M. describes feeling tremendous respect and loyalty toward this leader and would gladly follow them to any organization.

Participant 2

M.D. was leading several technology infrastructure teams at a large North American energy company when their father passed away rather quickly. M.D. called their leader and peers to let them know what had happened and took some time away to plan the funeral and grieve.

When it came time for the funeral, M.D. was “extremely touched by the number of people from work that were there; my leader was there and a whole bunch of my coworkers ... that show of support was really comforting and special at that time.” M.D. was the type of leader who made cultivating relationships with others a priority, “but to have that in the time of need with family and to have the people make that show of support gave me a lot of strength.” Once M.D. returned to work, their leader continued to check in and show authentic concern for M.D. and the family. As M.D. noted about their leader, “It wasn’t just a work supervisor-employee relationship, but through our one-on-ones probably even just meeting each other in the hall, his conversation showed that he cared.” This leader authentically cared about people, which created a psychologically safe environment in which M.D. could be themselves: “I could be me; I could hurt; I could be joyful; I could be happy about the projects or frustrated with the projects, but it was all of me, not just the work side of me there.”

Participant 3

A.D. was a team leader at a large energy company when an opportunity was presented to them by a senior leader to manage a large, multi-year technology project. This project would touch every desktop in the entire organization and carried with it significant risk. A project of this calibre would normally be assigned to a senior person, but this leader saw potential in A.D. and was willing to give them a chance. To help ensure that A.D. was successful, this leader engaged the services of an executive coach to provide support throughout the project. A.D. noted their leader “was willing to sort of speak on my behalf to get this executive coach to help me through this journey has, well like I said, it has changed my life.” Although this leader provided A.D. with an amazing learning opportunity, they were also held accountable for moving the

project to completion. This leader insisted on open and honest communication regarding project milestones and offered support “in a way to help me succeed and help me grow ... it was never demeaning.” As a result of this opportunity, A.D. noted their view of leadership was changed, and they now look for opportunities to help others grow. A.D. stated,

It’s changed the way I see the world in the sense that it’s all about people ... companies come and go, you may change jobs, but at the end of the day, it’s about the people and it’s about the relationship and the support that you get within the organization ... that’s what truly matters.

Participant 4

W.S. was leading a technology team responsible for unifying desktop software delivery at a large North American energy company. After a recent merger, desktop software delivery was different across the new organization, and this needed to be addressed for scalability. W.S. and their team were tasked with finding software that would deliver applications to some or all desktops in a remote and automated fashion. A product was finally chosen; however, it soon became apparent that the product did not deliver on all the features the vendor promised. W.S. and the team worked many long days and nights with the vendor to address the deficiencies, but what started out as technical issues soon became a vendor management problem, and this caused the project to fall further and further behind. One particular evening, W.S. was working very late and thought he was the only one in the office. Feeling very discouraged about the lack of progress with this vendor, W.S. was surprised to find their leader walk into the office and sit down. W.S. explained the challenges encountered with the vendor and indicated that they were

“pretty discouraged.... I had my doubts that we could get that product functional to a point where we could deliver it to the organization.” Sensing W.S.’s distress, this leader stated,

“You know, W.S., in the end, this is just stuff, and all we can do is our best, and I know how hard you’re working on it and I have faith that we’ll solve the problems, we’ll get to the finish line, but most importantly that this is really just stuff,” and he used those very words. He said, “This is just stuff. It really isn’t the most important thing. Your family and friendships and your health, those are the things that matter.”

Ultimately, the project was successful and, as W.S. noted,

In no small part, that success had its roots in a really simple, small action by [this leader] that meant so much to me, [and] had a ripple effect on a team of 30 or 40 people who were just as despondent as I was ... it was a small thing, but it meant so much.

W.S. learned from this behaviour and incorporated it into their leadership practices going forward.

Participant 5

While in a vice president role for a medium North American energy company, H.K. suffered a serious health event at work that required hospitalization in the ICU, as well as significant recovery at home. As soon as H.K.’s direct reports and peers heard what had happened, there was an immediate outpouring of “compassion of not just my immediate boss, the SVP [senior vice president], but the CEO and then the board.” The CEO immediately contacted H.K.’s partner to express heartfelt concern and felt it was their fault that H.K. had suffered this event due to work stress, which was not the case. H.K. noted, “The overwhelming support, not just for me as the patient, but for the whole family unit, and the compassion to me as an entire

person versus just an executive in a company was staggering.” H.K.’s leader continued to check in to ask how they and the family were doing through the recovery, which was approximately 3 months long. There was a phased approach put in place for H.K. to return to work and this was adjusted as needed, depending on H.K.’s recovery. H.K. felt safe discussing their progress with senior leadership and was honest about any setbacks that occurred through their recovery. When reflecting on this time, H.K. stated, “I felt so much gratitude that this is where I work ... that the culture I believed was here really was here.” H.K. stated this event also helped their direct reports “see the support and see it in action, at all levels, you’re okay to bring your whole self ... the organization cares about your whole self.”

Participant 6

As a senior HR leader, B.S. was tasked with writing a confidential report for the board of a large North American organization. As they were working to incorporate feedback on yet another version of the report, B.S. became frustrated that the latest suggested changes from the CEO and other executive leaders involved mostly wordsmithing and other inconsequential modifications. B.S. felt that this cycle of feedback would never end. B.S. was working late on this report one evening after almost everyone had left the office, and they were feeling upset and tired. An executive leader in the same department noticed B.S. was frustrated, so they started a conversation with B.S. This leader apologized to B.S. about how frustrating this process was and that they understood. At this point, B.S. noted, “[The leader] kind of grabbed me by the shoulders and said, ‘We can do this.’” This action made B.S. feel as though “she picked up on my body language ... it said that she cared about me as a person and that she wanted to let me know that she did.” This acknowledgement created such loyalty toward this leader that B.S.

stated, “The end result was I’d do anything for her, and I continue to be friends with her, and I admire her, and I’ve learned from her.”

Participant 7

J.C. was a training consultant employed at a global food services company when they made a request to be moved back home so they could be close to their family. Training consultants were rarely relocated; however, J.C.’s leader indicated that if they were successful as an operations consultant with oversight to four restaurants, in addition to continuing as a training consultant, the relocation request would be considered. After several months of working two full-time positions, J.C. was told they could not be an operations consultant, therefore, the request to relocate was denied. J.C. was uncertain what to do next; however, they began looking for opportunities outside the company and also considered a demotion within the company so that relocation could happen. A short time later, J.C. was approached by another leader in the organization who had heard what happened, and they offered J.C. an opportunity to become a business consultant in the company with relocation. J.C. accepted the position and remembered “how excited I was that somebody wanted to help me and somebody in the company cared about what was important to me.” This leader’s actions reinforced for J.C. that “there are people inside of our company that care about people.” J.C. was able to relocate to be near the family and worked as part of this high-functioning team within the organization for 6 more years.

Participant 8

C.J. was a senior leader at a large North American energy company. After battling a chronic illness for years, it was decided that C.J. would require surgery to address their health issues. This surgery was significant and would require at least six weeks of recovery at home.

C.J.'s leadership role was such that receiving and responding to emails and text messages during evenings and weekends was common. When C.J.'s leader heard of the surgery, they assured C.J. they would not be contacted for any matter, no matter how urgent, during the recovery. To C.J.'s surprise, "it did legitimately go quiet ... very quiet." The first message C.J. received was 2 weeks after the surgery, and their leader wanted to know how they were and whether they needed anything. Shortly after that, a delivery of chocolates and other snacks arrived, as well as a message from their leader saying they were thinking of C.J. Even though this leader never asked any work-related questions, C.J. "knew damn well [that] things were freaking intense" at work. About a month after the surgery, C.J. was hoping to ease back into work; however, their doctor decided another week of recovery at home was necessary. C.J.'s leader was very understanding and continued to run interference for them. Eventually, C.J. was allowed back at work in a phased approach, and this leader continued to check in and ask how they were feeling. C.J. was pleasantly surprised and grateful that they were not contacted during the recovery period with work-related matters, and that they were able to return to work in a gradual manner. C.J. noted, "You reflect on your own leadership style like, okay, that's the behavior I want to do ... that's how I want people to feel when they're struggling." In addition to experiencing leadership growth, C.J. also felt loyalty toward this leader and that their values were aligned. C.J. continues to work in this organization today.

Narratives That Encompass Non-compassionate and Compassionate Leader Behaviours

Of the 12 participants in this research, eight narrated two distinct stories each (one of non-compassion and one of compassion) that were not connected, and four participants narrated

one story each that encompassed both non-compassionate and compassionate leader behaviours.

These four narratives are presented in this section.

Participant 9

M.M. was in a director role for a legacy organization that was being acquired by another company. As they worked to make the transition as smooth as possible for clients, their actions were undermined by a culture of toxicity and emotional abuse endorsed by their leader of the new, combined organization. They were often not invited to important events and ignored while in meetings, as well as isolated from key decision-makers within the organization. M.M. noted, “It didn’t take a rocket scientist to know that I was going to be let go.” After a period of 2 years, M.M. was terminated with considerable warning and severance. When M.M. was very close to leaving, a leader in the organization approached them and asked when the farewell lunch would be held. M.M. noted nothing had been planned and this leader was “mortified” that no one had taken the time to organize a farewell lunch or coffee. This leader promptly spoke with the chief operating officer and organized, not only a lunch with M.M. the next afternoon, but also a farewell coffee with all employees. This leader had always been very kind to M.M., checking in with them throughout the acquisition period to ask how they were. M.M. felt appreciated by the actions of this leader and noted “to me it was a real sign of, well, acknowledgement for the hard work, but also compassion for what I had been feeling like the whole time.” The previous 2 years of isolation and emotional abuse, however, caused them to experience depression and other mental health issues, as well as lead to a career shift and a subsequent downward standard of living as they approached retirement. M.M. stated, “It was absolutely personal. I got treated like

a nothing, like a nobody.” M.M. still experiences nightmares 8 years later with respect to specific incidents that occurred during this acquisition.

Participant 10

S.C. was leading a team of consultants within a large global consulting company when there was a serious technology failure at a client site that caused a prolonged outage to their auditing environment. S.C. was not able to reach their leader since they were off-site at a leadership retreat for the day, so S.C. managed the outage with their team and the client. Several days into the outage with S.C. and their team working around the clock with little or no sleep, it became apparent that there was no quick resolution. After one of many conference calls with the client, this one at 3:00 a.m., S.C.’s leader proceeded to yell at S.C. and berated them, stating S.C. had put the company into a situation with the client that was going to be detrimental to their relationship. S.C. broke down emotionally and although the leader sensed that they should not have yelled, they did not offer an apology, nor did they stop. S.C. immediately thought, “I failed; I failed him [and] I failed the company.” This outburst toward S.C. combined with the responsibility and stress of the outage, as well as lack of sleep, resulted in serious mental health impact. S.C. stated they thought they were “going to have a nervous breakdown because I couldn’t quit crying, no matter what.” In addition, this incident resurfaced trauma for S.C. of growing up with a perfectionist mother and feeling as though they were never good enough. Another leader in the organization was aware of the phone conversation that had taken place and stepped in to help S.C. navigate this outage with their team. This second leader called a meeting with S.C. and their team to plan next steps. As soon as the meeting started, S.C. was struggling to keep their emotions under control and began to cry.

[This leader] immediately came over ... and he stood behind me, his back pressing against my back.... The implied statement from him was, "I've got your back. You can do this, we'll do it together."... That was all I needed, was that I can do this, he's got my back.... All I need to do is put one foot in front of the other, move it forward.

This leader's behaviour allowed S.C. and their team to move forward and resolve the outage at the client site. In addition, this intervention made S.C. re-evaluate their leadership style, specifically stating, "I used the way that he responded and the way he behaved to emulate that as I built teams over the last few years." S.C. recently retired from this organization, stating that it was "with the highest level of self-confidence I have ever had in my life," and this was attributed directly to the intervention of that second leader. Had that second leader not intervened, S.C. noted, "I would have quit at the company.... I probably never would've worked again."

Participant 11

B.J. was a senior financial investment advisor with a major North American banking institution for over 20 years. After being one of two managing partners of a team at a suburban branch for several years, B.J. was notified by the senior leadership team that the team would be dissolved due to some internal personnel issues; however, senior leadership assured B.J. their position in the organization was safe and indicated, "They would support me as an employee, but they couldn't support the team anymore." B.J. felt valued that senior leadership notified them about this directive and allowed them to make the transition as smooth as possible for clients. As B.J. noted,

It felt rewarding ... it felt like a commitment from management, I guess, in the firm ... I guess it would make me feel wanted by the company to reach out and, in confidence, at the time ... it was more uplifting, and it made me respect them a little bit more.

B.J. notified their business partner of senior leadership's directive and immediately began the process of dissolving the team. As the dissolution process began, it became apparent that the day-to-day tasks became difficult as the team worked in an open-concept environment. As B.J. noted, this transition "created some uncomfortable days when you're dissolving [the partnership] as friends in business and you're sitting five feet apart from someone during the breakup and division of clients." The senior leader of the branch became aware of this difficulty and offered B.J. his private office and "sat with the assistants in open cubicles and allowed me to carry on the transition in his office and meet clients and continue on." As a result of these actions by senior leadership, B.J. felt "they were showing loyalty to me; as a result of that, I felt loyal back to them." What started out as a well-organized initiative to dismantle the team soon spiralled into a stressful affair that senior leadership washed their hands of, leaving B.J. to manage on their own. At the same time, B.J. requested a transfer to another office within the organization because this situation became so stressful that they could no longer work at that location and they "needed a change of scenery." Once B.J. formally requested the transfer, they were isolated and not provided with any support by senior leadership. B.J.'s leader made it very clear there would be little to no support for this transition by stating, "We'll supply some bins, but we're not packing them and we're not paying for movers." As a result, B.J. moved his possessions, along with confidential client files, at their own expense and time. At the new location, B.J. was given a substandard office with very little in the way of furniture so, again, they furnished the office at

their expense. B.J.'s senior leader never checked in on them to ask how the transition was going or whether they needed any assistance. As a result, B.J. became disillusioned with their leader and the organization and noted, "It's made me realize that the firm is just that; it's always bigger than the individuals and it always exists." B.J. considered leaving but decided not to because this would have been disruptive for clients; however, they also stated, "If there wouldn't have been any disruption to the clients, I would've left."

Participant 12

P.S. was a contractor with a bilingual (English and French) training company as a consultant. Their primary responsibility was to deliver training in a virtual environment. P.S. was assigned an assistant to help with various administrative tasks, as well as assist with the delivery of training. After a short time in this role, it became apparent to P.S. that their assistant was unreliable and was also not bilingual, which was a requirement for delivery of this training. P.S. tried speaking with this person many times, but they would refuse to speak on the phone, nor would they respond to emails. The situation became so frustrating to P.S. that they raised their voice in anger toward the assistant after a particular training session that did not go well. P.S. brought this issue to their leader's attention; however, the leader denied that there was a problem indicating that the assistant had always been responsive to their requests. The leader blamed P.S. for the conflict and "actually suggested that there was something wrong with me personally, my personality." This left P.S. "demoralized, abandoned, uncertain, questioning myself, and not knowing what to do," which led to anxiety and stress. This uncertainty and self-doubt prompted P.S. to engage the services of "a psychologist; I'd never done that in my life ... I really thought maybe I'm mentally ill, that I had a personality disorder." P.S. completed the contract with this

training company; however, “everything became transactional” as this leader purposely isolated P.S. from the rest of the organization. P.S. noted, when “I was asked to do something, I did it; I needed information, I asked for it; I was asked for information, I gave it.” P.S. continued to deliver training to clients for 2 years before deciding to end the contractual relationship. When P.S. told their leader that they would be starting a full-time contract in a different organization, there was a shift from not being supportive to realizing that P.S. had done all this amazing work with clients, so this leader presented an offer to extend the contract. P.S. declined and, unlike the previous incident regarding the assistant, this leader was now genuinely supportive about the new opportunity. The leader asked how they could make the transition of P.S. leaving easier and offered congratulations. P.S. felt “relieved, ... supported, ... cared for, ... nourished” by the reaction of their leader, and it felt “genuine.” P.S. stated, “I appreciated she was actually putting my wellbeing ahead of her own in that situation.... I didn’t expect that, that she would put my wellbeing ahead of her own.” This outpouring of support and well-wishes from their leader allowed P.S. to leave the organization on good terms and felt “that even though I’m walking away now from these contracts, I feel that we may be able to collaborate in the future, and that’s really positive.”

Categorization of Narratives

Honouring the wholeness of each participant story was an important step in this research. In the final section of this chapter, I will now turn to a discussion of commonalities in the types of stories shared as well as patterns observed in leader behaviours as described by participants. This final section, in response to Question 1, is organized according to the types of (a) stories

shared by participants, (b) compassionate leader behaviour, and (c) non-compassionate leader behaviour. Each of these themes is explored in more depth below.

Types of Stories Shared by Participants

The types of stories shared by participants can be categorized into four groups: (a) personal challenges, (b) family challenges, (c) organizational change beyond participants' control, and (d) career growth. Narratives of a personal nature included topics such as recovery from illness or surgery, support in a difficult work situation, and instances where personal boundaries were not respected. In contrast, stories categorized as having a family theme included loss of a family member, parental leave, and relocation for better quality of life with family. The largest, and most impactful category from a perspective of suffering, was organizational change, which included narratives such as navigating mergers or acquisitions, working in a toxic culture, not being heard or being dismissed, dealing with business interruption or responding to the failure of a product or service, endeavouring to meet stressful project deadlines, and being laid off or terminated. Lastly, stories that described career growth included topics such as the opportunity to grow and learn through promotion, career move within an organization, and acknowledgement of hard work on a project.

As an extension of the types of stories shared, I also observed *how* participants narrated their experiences of both leader compassion and non-compassion in terms of chronology of events and some participants' ability to see both compassion and non-compassion in the same story. For the first observation, participants rarely followed a chronological order of events. There was, in fact, considerable movement across the timeline of a story as participants moved back and forth to provide details and complete the narratives. Another unexpected observation

was that four out of 12 participants narrated one story that encompassed both compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviours, not two distinct stories. In the instructions to participants, I had asked for two narratives: one of leader compassion and another of leader non-compassion. As such, it was surprising to note some participants perceived one narrative that encompassed both types of leader behaviours as two separate narratives. This reinforces my constructivist view of narrative inquiry as a meaning-making form of communication that is co-created in a space between the narrator and the researcher.

Types of Non-Compassionate Leader Behaviour

Leader behaviours in the non-compassionate narratives, as described by participants, can also be categorized to some degree. The types of non-compassionate leader behaviours can be grouped as follows: (a) punitive actions, (b) divisive behaviour that undermines teamwork, and (c) self-serving behaviour. Punitive actions by leaders included leading with fear, crossing work–life boundaries with subordinates, and name-calling or yelling, which constitutes verbal abuse. With respect to divisive leader behaviour, actions such as invalidating feelings or emotions (gaslighting), ignoring or isolating subordinates who do not share the same opinion, and expecting subordinates to make moral compromises were included in this category. Lastly, self-serving leader behaviour included sacrificing others to protect themselves and looking for someone to blame for failures. It is important to note that although these behaviours were narrated by recipients who observed leaders responding in non-compassionate ways; it does not speak to motivation behind the behaviour since leader–subordinate pairs were not interviewed. However, participants’ perspectives showed these leaders demonstrated little awareness of the harmful impact their words and actions had on others.

Types of Compassionate Leader Behaviour

Compassionate leader narratives were more challenging to categorize since participants described ways of being more so than specific actions. Nevertheless, categorization was still possible in that three types of compassionate leader behaviours were noted: (a) a coaching approach, (b) team focus, and (c) authenticity. Compassionate leader behaviours in the coach approach category included providing professional growth opportunities to subordinates, acknowledging and validating emotions, and active listening. Team-focused leader behaviours included demonstrating a we-versus-me mindset, acknowledging the hard work of others, and protecting or shielding team members. Lastly, authenticity in compassionate leader behaviour was described by participants with actions such as leaders showing respect, support, encouragement, kindness, and humility; genuinely caring for others' well-being; and aligning actions with their words. Taken together, these compassionate leader behaviours demonstrated leaders' awareness of the impact their words and behaviours had on others and how they leveraged their positions of power and influence for the greater good.

Summary

In this chapter, I responded to my first inquiry question by sharing the courageous stories of all twelve participants in a condensed format. I attempted to follow a format for each story, describing the situation and the leader's behaviour, and then closed with how the participant (recipient) made meaning of the behaviour. Where appropriate, I included phrases in the participants' own words to remain as close to the transcribed interviews as possible. In addition, I discussed the types of narratives by way of categorization and provided insight into compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour as described by participants. In the next

chapter, I explore the key themes that were identified across all stories, separated into two main categories of compassionate leader behaviour and non-compassionate leader behaviours.

Chapter Five: Findings – Analysis of Narratives

The previous chapter responded to the question, “What are recipient stories of perceived compassionate and non-compassionate behaviour by leaders in corporate workplace settings?” As a reminder of my analysis process described in Chapter 3, to arrive at those stories, I summarized participant narratives in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I analyze those narratives further by discussing key themes related to how participants derived meaning of compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviours. Whereas Chapter 3 responded to my first inquiry question, this chapter responds to my second inquiry question: How do recipients make meaning of perceived compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour in response to their suffering? Having acknowledged individual participant narratives in the previous chapter, in this chapter I endeavour to explore several common themes across narratives of non-compassionate and compassionate leader behaviour. The key themes identified from the compassionate leader behaviour narratives are:

- Positive perception of self and work
- Loyalty
- Multiplier effect

The key themes identified from the non-compassionate leader behaviour narratives are:

- Suffering
- Visceral emotions
- Impact on mental and physical health
- Debilitating self-doubt
- Disillusionment

- Work-home boundary infringement

The key themes identified from the narratives containing both compassion and non-compassionate leader behaviour are:

- Growth as a leader
- Reflection and reframing

These themes are explored in more depth below.

Each transcribed narrative was analyzed twice and leaders' behaviours were coded, as was the corresponding meaning or impact that participants derived from the incident. The key themes are grouped according to whether they emerged in compassionate, non-compassionate leader behaviour narratives or both. The first section explores how participants made meaning from compassionate leader behaviours, and the second section explores non-compassionate leader behaviours. A third section discusses findings that could not be grouped into these two categories but were worthy of further exploration.

Impact of Compassionate Leader Behaviours

In this section, I present the three key findings from the analysis of the compassionate leader narratives, which include positive perception of self and work, loyalty, and the multiplier effect.

Positive Perception of Self and Work

One of the most dramatic findings of the impact of compassionate leader behaviour is that every participant spoke of either increased self-confidence, feeling valued or supported, or feeling as though their opinion mattered to their leader. As S.C. retired from the organization they were employed with, they noted,

I am walking away with the highest level of self-confidence I have ever had in my life ...

I can actually put it right back to that situation and knowing that it didn't matter what was going on, they had my back.

In much the same way, W.S. described what it felt like to be shown compassion by their leader and to feel supported: "In that moment, because of somebody's compassion, you get perspective, you get confidence that they support you and that they'll be with you, in success and in failure." With respect to feeling valued, when B.J. was approached by senior leadership in advance of the division reorganization, they indicated feeling rewarded and that "it felt like a commitment from management, I guess, in the firm; it ... made me feel wanted by the company to reach out and, in confidence at the time" to be given advance notice of the changes.

Related to feeling supported is leader compassion can demonstrate that people matter in the organization. When discussing the impact of leader compassion shown to H.K. on their direct reports, they stated,

For them ... to see the support and see it in action, at all levels, [it says that] you're okay to bring your whole self or the organization cares about your whole self; I think it was nice for them to see the culture ... was organization-wide, [and] that this is how we react.

The feelings of being valued and supported as a result of compassionate leader behaviour goes beyond changing how the participant feels about themselves: it also extends to how they feel about the organization and the culture.

In addition to the positive perception of self and work is the finding that participants felt there was psychological safety when speaking up about issues and problems, or presenting ideas,

to their leader without fear of being punished or ridiculed. With respect to psychological safety, W.S. summed this up nicely by stating,

It becomes self-perpetuating and it's an environment where people treat each other as equals, it's about leveraging the best idea, not the idea that came from the senior person, and [in a situation like this] people ... work without fear.

For J.C., the trust that was created by their leader demonstrating compassionate behaviours enabled them to feel safe: "I knew that I could talk to [my leaders] about anything that I was upset about or concerned or something that was impacting me." Similarly, M.D. stated, "I could be me; I could hurt; I could be joyful; I could be happy about the projects or frustrated with the projects, but it was all of me, not just the work side of me there." When asked to elaborate on the relationship with their leader who demonstrated compassionate behaviours, M.D. noted, "Even though it was still a supervisor-employee relationship, it felt like it was a safe relationship." For H.K., who was recovering from a medical event, it was the show of compassion that allowed them to feel safe speaking with their leader about mental health challenges related to the incident. H.K. stated, "I felt safe enough to do that; so, when you see [your leader's compassionate side] in action, then you really believe it, that it's a thing." As J.C. was trying to determine how to transfer within the organization so that relocation would be possible, they noted how psychological safety for them was one outcome of their leader behaving compassionately at this difficult time: "[Compassionate behaviour] ... built a great trust bank because I knew that I could talk to [my leader] about anything that I was upset about, or concerned or something that was impacting me." Psychological safety created by leaders allowed

participants to not only feel as though they could discuss issues or challenges without reprimand, but they also expressed feeling as though their leaders were present and listening.

Perhaps related to psychological safety is the predictability of leader behaviour. W.S. noted that psychological safety as a result of compassionate leader behaviours is connected with leader behaviour predictability: “The good leaders care all the time, and you know they’re going to care, and you know that emotional predictability is there; you know they will react a certain way.” This would suggest psychological safety is not only a result of compassion, but also a matter of the participant knowing what to expect in how their leader will react when issues or challenges are brought to their attention.

Loyalty

Compassionate leader behaviours resulted in participants feeling a sense of loyalty toward the leader and, although not all participants reported this, those that did expressed this feeling of loyalty in very strong language. For W.S., who was working through a challenging project late at night and was offered encouragement by their leader, they noted, “I guess, in that moment, what I was thinking is, I would run through a brick wall for this person, you know what I mean.” Similarly, A.M. discussed their feelings about the leader who supported their return to graduate school as “if he called me today and said, ‘I’d like you to come to work for me and I’ll pay you nothing,’ I would seriously consider it.” M.D. spoke about the loyalty they felt toward their leader, who supported them through the loss of their father, in this way: “Work wasn’t a place I’d just go so many hours a week. I would work for [this leader]. He had me as a dedicated employee, *a person*.” B.S. spoke about their leader, who supported them through a difficult work project, as “the end result was I’d do anything for her, and I continue to be friends with her, and I

admire her, and I've learned from her." For J.C., the compassionate behaviours they observed from their leader interrupted a job search that was well underway to leave the organization: "It kept me longer in the company, because at that point I basically was looking for a job and looking like I was going to leave, because I couldn't see a way out." One participant, H.K., expressed loyalty more toward the organization than specific leaders by noting, "That awe of what we have here and what we've created, ... like, when the chips are down, they lead with values-based compassion through the company." When participants feel such a powerful sense of loyalty toward their leader or the organization, this would suggest leader compassion might be a crucial factor in employee retention, a topic beyond the scope of this study that would merit further research.

Related to this sense of loyalty for leaders who demonstrate compassionate behaviours, is the feeling that participants did not want to disappoint their leaders. Many of the participants who felt loyalty to their leader also indicated that they wanted to perform at a higher level than before the compassionate leader behaviours were observed. M.D. described this well when they noted,

Everybody enjoyed working with him and for him ... not just through that, but through many other actions of his, he demonstrated that he was a caring leader and so people wanted to work with him and for him and to do their best work-wise and personally for him.

Some participants, such as A.D., felt that even though their leader was compassionate, they also had high standards and held the participant accountable for good work. In A.D.'s words, "It also made me very accountable to deliver because I wanted to really make sure that I

delivered to his expectations.” B.S. shared similar feelings toward their leader by stating, “The result was she got my trust, and she would get my unconditional support to do something, even though it was tough.” Finally, W.S. explained the compassionate behaviour of their leader resulted in greater motivation to do better: “It’s a small thing, but in terms of motivating you and driving you to achieve more than you otherwise might have been able to, that’s how it occurs, you know.” Much like the sense of loyalty for one’s leader and organization, not wanting to disappoint a leader who demonstrated compassion may suggest compassion plays a role in employee retention. In addition, this may speak to employees going above and beyond for a leader they feel is supportive and for whom they admire.

Multiplier Effect

Compassionate leader behaviours not only created positive feelings for participants; they had the added benefit of participants replicating the compassionate behaviours to their direct reports in what one participant, W.S., called the “multiplier effect.” Several participants noted that when they were shown compassion by their leader in their time of suffering, it provided them the modeling behaviour with which to replicate compassion to their teams and, in some cases, participants noted that this behaviour was something they wanted to continue to develop as leaders. C.J. noted, “[In] these situations you reflect on your own leadership style, like, ‘Okay, that’s the behavior I want to do.’” The same was true for W.S. who, because of their leader’s compassionate behaviour, stated, “I can say as a matter of fact that there were probably half a dozen times in my career where I used that same message with people that I was leading in difficult situations.” In addition, W.S. noted,

I think that interaction and others like it that I had with [my leader] shaped the way I led teams, and so I benefitted from it but I learned from it; *more than just propping me up, it made me a better leader*, and I'd like to think or hope that the way I led made others better leaders because I tried to be compassionate and thoughtful. [Emphasis added.]

W.S. further elaborated on how this one instance of compassion shaped their leadership style decades later:

I worked really hard throughout my career so that, when things failed, to try and be even calmer than I normally was, to try to be more patient than I normally was, to listen better than I normally did, and I think I was very effective at leading through those sort of issues for those very reasons, because most of all, quite often in those situations, I would say to people, 'Remember, this is just stuff, right? We'll get through this.', and it shaped the way I handle those situations profoundly.

S.C. noted their leadership style shifted when a senior leader intervened on their behalf with compassion. In S.C.'s words, "I used the way that he responded and the way he behaved, to emulate that as I built teams over the last few years." In similar fashion, M.D. stated, "For me, it also helped me see myself wanting to be much like that for people who reported to me." Leaders who demonstrate compassionate behaviours can present a powerful opportunity for participants to re-evaluate how they would like to be present for their direct reports, both in current and future situations. This phenomenon of the multiplier effect can have profound impact for emerging leaders in that it provides an opportunity for compassion to be observed and felt, which might then be demonstrated to future direct reports. One could argue that compassionate leader

behaviours, if this multiplier effect in future research is found to be significant, might help to create a sustainable organizational culture that demonstrates the importance of compassion.

Impact of Non-Compassionate Leader Behaviours

In the previous section, I discussed key findings of this research with respect to participant impact of compassionate leader behaviours. In this section, I will examine key findings of how participants made meaning of non-compassionate leader behaviours, and the resulting impact to participants of these behaviours. The findings from non-compassionate leader narratives include suffering, visceral emotions, impact on mental and physical health, debilitating self-doubt, disillusionment, and work-home boundary infringement.

Suffering

When participants narrated stories of how they felt as participants of non-compassionate leader behaviours, the emotions experienced were raw and visceral and it was clear that non-compassionate leader behaviour caused suffering among participants—for some, the suffering remains just as strong today, years after the non-compassionate incident, as it did at the time of the event. In this qualitative study, it is impossible to agree on a scientific measure of suffering since it was described differently depending on the situation, the triggers of that particular person or setting, and the intensity. What triggered suffering in one participant may not in another; however, suffering as a consequence of another's behaviour can be observed and described.

Every participant in this study clearly expressed suffering as a response to their leader's behaviour in some form—most even used the term “suffering” unprompted. S.C. described suffering as a result of their leader's non-compassionate behaviour in this way: “I thought I was having a nervous breakdown.” Similarly, A.M. described the consequence of long-standing

suffering as feeling “so burned out from all of this stuff that went on and just never quite got back on my feet; I tie it back to how [my leader] treated me as I was terminated.” W.S. described profound consequences of their leader’s non-compassionate behaviour as thinking “I’m not sure I’ll survive this.” Other participants tied suffering to how they felt as a direct result of their leader’s non-compassionate behaviours. For M.M., as they were navigating a difficult 2-year merger with another organization, suffering was created when they perceived that their leader treated them “like a nothing, like a nobody” by dehumanizing them on an almost daily basis. Furthermore, M.M. found themselves downsizing after they were laid off, which was not completely, but their leader’s non-compassionate behaviour made this worse and this caused substantial, longer term, suffering: “I ended up having to sell my condo and move to another part of the city. I loved where I lived, and I loved my condo.” B.S. emphatically stated that “was probably one of the worst things that had ever happened to me in my career,” when describing the impact of their leader’s non-compassionate behaviour when they demanded B.S. return early from a long overdue family vacation. As a recipient of non-compassionate leader behaviour, P.S. described their suffering as their leader blamed them for an underperforming employee and even implied that P.S. had a mental disorder: “I was demoralized, I felt abandoned; I was stressed and anxious, and uncertain of myself, not knowing what to do.” These are all powerful and heart-wrenching feelings that participants described when their leaders spoke or behaved in non-compassionate ways. The next section discusses some of the more specific consequences of suffering participants disclosed in their narratives.

Visceral Emotions

Participants described feeling powerful emotions such as anger or rage, bewilderment at how they were treated, shame or humiliation, and feeling isolated or abandoned as a result of leader non-compassion. Many participants were brought to tears. Immediately after being terminated, A.M. noted experiencing “rage, there was a lot of rage” with respect to how their leader informed them of the termination and, subsequently, A.M.’s team and peers. For A.M., this leader’s non-compassionate behaviour was still “felt” and remembered almost 8 years later: “I think I handle it better [now], but has it subsided? Some. Is it gone? No, and I think I’ll remember this till the day I die.” Similarly, C.J. expressed anger in this way after their leader suggested they return to work a week early from parental leave: “Like what the fuck?! Are you serious?! Like literally F-bombs and anger, shock. Like, I can’t believe this is happening.” As S.C. was dealing with an unexpected technology outage at a client site, their leader berated them over the phone at 3:00 a.m. S.C. described feeling many emotions toward this leader as the result of this non-compassionate behaviour, including “anger that I didn’t create this situation; I was doing the best I could, why can’t you see that?” It is challenging to convey in writing the intensity of the anger felt by participants when describing their respective stories as recipients of non-compassionate leader behaviours. It was common for participants to describe the anger while also feeling disbelief, as demonstrated in S.C.’s case above. In other words, recipients of non-compassionate leader behaviour were often taken by surprise and did not feel the behaviour was warranted. As a result, participants continue to feel the betrayal and wounding many years after the incident.

Other emotions were described by recipients of non-compassionate leader behaviours, often in combination with anger and disbelief. S.C. described how they dealt with the aftermath of their leader's non-compassionate behaviour while navigating a client's technology outage as "I cried, and I cried for hours; I couldn't cope with the situation anymore." For other participants, anger was accompanied by shame or humiliation, as in A.M.'s case with respect to how they felt due to the manner in which their leader terminated them: "About an hour later, I walk out and there's nobody around because the floor was cleared ... I can't even say goodbye to anybody, and so now I feel humiliated." P.S. noted feeling disbelief when their leader implied they were to blame for their assistant not responding to emails or phone calls: "She actually suggested that there was something wrong with me personally, my personality, and that I did something." Feeling these emotions is challenging, but even more so when they are experienced in tandem with other powerful emotions. For example, feeling anger alone can be exhausting but when combined with shame or disbelief, this makes it more challenging for participants to unpack, and sometimes even identify, each distinct emotion.

Feeling isolated, excluded, or ignored in one form or another as a consequence of enduring non-compassionate leader behaviour was expressed by several participants. In some cases, these feelings of isolation were a result of external factors (e.g., the actions of others), but in some cases, it was self-inflicted. As M.M. was navigating a stressful 2-year acquisition, they became very aware of isolating behaviours by their leader. For example, M.M. would attend meetings to which they had been invited only to find there would consistently be one chair short, or the meeting would unofficially begin before the designated start time. These situations could be considered microaggressions and were not only uncomfortable for everyone, but also isolating

for M.M. As M.M. described it, “Because I was non-existent, literally they didn’t have a chair for me, and so I just stood there with my cane and, yeah, [waited] until my counterpart got a chair for me.” M.M. also noted, “[The leadership team was] making sure that they had built these silos right to the ceiling, [so] there was no way to collaborate; I was very isolated in my little office [and] no one was talking to me.” Similarly, B.J. described feeling isolated after they had requested a transfer to another branch within the same large financial organization. Instead of hiring movers, as is typical in large organizations, the leadership team only agreed to provide moving bins. As B.J. noted,

The firm will hire outside movers to fill bins [and] move them 20 feet down a hallway and then unpack them; what I was told from the receiving branch was, “We’ll supply some bins, but we’re not packing them and we’re not paying for movers.”

B.J. also noted their new office at the receiving branch was much smaller and it was lacking basic office furniture, which B.J. had to personally provide at their cost. In addition, B.J. was left alone to navigate day-to-day challenges because

there [weren’t] little check-ins along the way, like, “Hey, now that you’ve been settled for a week or two is there anything that you need that we’ve missed? Is there anything [you need] to make the transition easier?” There was no extension of “Are you settled? Everything good? Do you need anything?” That didn’t exist.

P.S. described feeling isolated when their leader: “Basically, I think, had decided that I was not fit to be introduced to anyone just because this other person found it so difficult to work with me.” Further to this, P.S. noted, “At the time, I think I felt abandoned in the sense that I felt that I was left on my own.” For W.S., the feeling of abandonment was the result of their leader not

supporting a decision that was made to extend a technology outage for safety reasons. Instead of being supported by senior leadership, W.S. noted, “We defended this [decision] for months on end, and it was amazing how people sort of disappeared ... you found yourself standing there by yourself.” The feeling of isolation or abandonment intensified for W.S. when they noted, “On numerous occasions, I’d get off calls or out of meetings and I’d say to myself, ‘This is just a witch hunt.’” These examples of isolation or exclusion narrated by recipients of non-compassionate leader behaviour are difficult to read, and could potentially have other, life-long consequences that were not explored in this research but should be considered.

Impact on Mental and Physical Health

So much can be said about the negative impact on mental and physical health of participants in the aftermath of their leader’s non-compassionate behaviour. Sadly, for many participants, mental and physical health continued to be compromised years after the non-compassionate incident as they tried to make meaning of the behaviour. Participants described specific impacts immediately following the incident such as generalized stress, not sleeping well, anxiety, feeling worn down, and not being able to control emotions. M.D. described how reporting to a new leader who did not value their contributions or experience caused generalized stress and sleep disruption:

About that time ... I started not sleeping as well; I started having more stress. Even if I wouldn’t wake up with work on the mind, I knew that the stress of each and every day was there and so I started getting far less sleep each night. It takes its toll.

For M.D., increased stress and lack of sleep over time meant that they did not feel as effective in their organizational role: “[Because] I was a lot more stressed or run down, [I] probably wasn’t

as effective, possibly not as effective, [and this was] certainly not long-term sustainable.” W.S. also felt physical and emotional stress as a consequence of their leader’s non-compassionate behaviour, specifically in having to continually justify a work-related decision for safety reasons: “I think it’s a physical impact in terms of your health, it certainly affected that; [and] it has an emotional impact in terms of the stress that it creates and the constant worry about your team and yourself.”

For some participants, the stress of dealing with their leader’s non-compassionate behaviour triggered other emotional trauma. As S.C. was trying to make sense of their leader’s explosive behaviour during a late-night phone call to troubleshoot a client’s technology outage, S.C. described the following days after the incident:

I was still really struggling with gaining control of my emotions. That is where I thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown because I couldn’t quit crying, no matter what. Somebody would look at me, I’d cry. Somebody would talk to me, I’d cry. I’d be sitting in front of my computer, I’d cry.

Had another leader in the organization not intervened on S.C.’s behalf, the impact of their leader’s non-compassionate behaviour could have been more detrimental than it was. For A.M., there was no such intervention and for years after the non-compassionate incident with their leader, it was evident that the struggle to make meaning of what happened continues: “It’s a lot, it’s a lot to deal with at once. And probably the last, I don’t know, few months is the first time in 7 years I felt like, maybe I can do this.” H.K. noted that they don’t remember many specific consequences regarding their leader’s non-compassionate behaviour, partly because it happened years prior, but also because they felt traumatized by how an entire department was laid off, with

no debriefing for those who remained with the organization. H.K. described this in the following way:

So yeah, I don't even know, like, clearly it must have been somewhat traumatic. I don't even remember how that rest of that week went until I found out they were just going to move me into regular marketing support.

Similarly, as P.S. was dealing with an unsupportive leader who blamed P.S. for an underperforming direct report, they noted feeling "demoralized; I was stressed [and] I was very anxious—I felt it in my body." For some participants, recounting their story of leader non-compassionate behaviour was a trigger to reliving the consequences. For M.M. who occasionally socializes with former co-workers, they noted feeling dismay at how their co-workers remembered events differently: "I still do have a hard time talking to a couple of my friends that still work there ... because it brings back a lot of 'How can you say that? Don't you remember what they did?'"

As M.M. continued to express their disappointment of how events were interpreted differently by co-workers, they very poignantly expressed how what we sometimes think are small actions can have a much bigger impact: "If someone doesn't have a healthy self-confidence, or a healthy sense of worth and value, that can really destroy someone ... just little things that we do." Every participant who shared a narrative of leader non-compassion indicated that they experienced some level of stress immediately following the incident, and it was evident that some continued to cope with the physical and emotional consequences of leader non-compassion for years after a specific incident.

Debilitating Self-Doubt

Another consequence of leader non-compassion that participants talked about was how they began to doubt themselves or their work after a specific incident of leader non-compassion. Some questioned themselves with respect to recalling specifics of the incident, while others began to doubt their work skills and place in the organization. After being ignored and discredited for 2 years during an acquisition by another organization, M.M. noted, “I think fear had set in and sadness and then I started doubting my work, my qualifications, my work ethic even.” While H.K. was describing their narrative of leader non-compassion about how an entire department in the organization was laid off with no debrief after to those who remained, H.K. indicated, “When you’re going through it, I just kept thinking, ‘Well, maybe I’m making a big deal of this. Nobody else seems to be blinking or be upset by it. Or maybe it’s [because] I’m a girl or I’m younger.’” P.S. experienced self-doubt when their leader was unsupportive and blamed P.S. for an underperforming direct report: “The fact that she made it about me, it was upsetting, it was stressful [and] I have to say, it made me question myself a lot.” As a consequence of this growing self-doubt, P.S. noted, “I questioned myself to the point, like I said, I went to a psychologist ... and I’ve never done that.” There is no doubt that participants experienced self-doubt immediately following non-compassionate leader behaviour; however, a more troubling discovery is that some continued to feel that self-doubt years after the incident.

Some participants experienced self-doubt long after a leader non-compassion incident. In A.M.’s case, because of several personal losses that occurred around the same time as when they were terminated by a leader who demonstrated non-compassionate behaviour, they continued to struggle with why they are unable to move forward even with professional help: “I just keep

thinking about why I can't do better, why am I stuck in this? Why am I stuck in the abyss, why can't I do better?" Similarly, S.C. noted that their leader's non-compassionate behaviour toward them seemed "to reinforce my feelings of inferiority." In a deeper dive of their self-doubt, S.C. described the following:

Because I have a perfectionist mother, and I never felt good enough in her eyes. That's exactly how I felt in this situation, that I had, first of all, I had let him down. I wasn't doing a good enough job [and] I'm not good enough.

B.S. described how they were the recipient of their leader's non-compassionate behaviour and, as a consequence, they were left no choice but to cut short a long overdue family vacation. At this point, B.S. became keenly aware that their leader was not the person they first thought: "It was very eye opening, and it was ... I'm going to say an epiphany. You know? Such a strong word, but the epiphany was I may have made a mistake." B.S. went on to explain that this mistake was in uprooting their family and moving to the US for this opportunity. B.S. continued to explain, "Really, [my leader] didn't care about my family, he didn't care about my personal stress, he didn't care about our life—he only cared about me getting back to help [the organization]." In fact, B.S. noted, "Getting stressed just thinking about it" while narrating the incident, which speaks to how profound the impact of their leader's non-compassion behaviour was. It would seem that for those participants who still feel wounded by their leader's behaviour years after the fact, reliving the incident appeared to trigger some or all of the same feelings that were experienced immediately after the leader non-compassion incident. This speaks to how profound the impact is to those for whom non-compassion is directed.

Disillusionment

There is little doubt that leader non-compassion had detrimental impact to participants at a personal level, but there was also organizational impact. More than any of the other finding, every participant in this study expressed disillusionment in both their leader and organization when telling their stories of leader non-compassion. Some participants expressed immediately losing respect or trust for their leader as a consequence of their leader's non-compassionate behaviour, while others voiced disillusionment with the organization as a whole. Some participants expressed disillusionment with both their leader and the organization as a result of leader non-compassion. In addition, many of the participants mentioned they were either thinking of leaving the organization as a direct result of leader non-compassion, or they had resigned. As C.J. was attempting to understand why they had been asked to cut their parental leave short, there was a definite sense of leader disillusionment expressed: "It made me kind of lose trust in the company; maybe not as much in the company, a little bit in the company, definitely in the person." Further discussion revealed a sense of disillusionment with the organizational culture and weighing the potential of leaving the organization as a direct consequence: "A little bit of a hit on the brand as well, like, if this is really the culture we're making here, maybe I'll go somewhere else." For participants like B.J., who initially trusted the organization to have their best interests at heart, being the recipient of non-compassionate leader behaviour caused them to re-evaluate their priorities, putting their clients first and the organization second. As B.J. noted,

I think, in the big picture, it's made me realize that the firm is just that ... it's always bigger than the individuals and it always exists. People retire, firms don't. You're not as worthy as what you might have thought.

B.J. considered leaving the organization, a place they had worked for more than 20 years, as a direct result of their leader's non-compassionate behaviour: "If an opportunity would've presented [itself] ... and there wouldn't have been any disruption to the clients, I would've left."

When S.C. was narrating their story of leader non-compassion, they were very adamant about their plan to leave the organization had another leader not intervened on their behalf. S.C. stated, "At that point in time, [my] whole thought was, I'm done, I can't do this anymore ... this is not the kind of life I want to have." S.C. further elaborated about their intention to leave the organization, and potentially the workforce; if this other leader had not intervened, "I would have quit the company [and] I probably never would've worked again." As A.M. was narrating their story of leader non-compassion in how they were terminated, they explained that they had already disengaged because of this leader's behaviour and were hoping to leave the organization on their own terms:

I was looking, anyway, to leave [the organization] ... but there's a difference when you get to choose your exit, as opposed to someone else choosing it for you. And not only that, how it's done is what gets seared in your mind forever. I knew my days were numbered. I just wanted the choice to leave.

Unlike S.C. who continued to work at the same organization because of another leader's compassionate intervention, A.M. not only left that organization, but they also left the workforce as a result of their leader's non-compassionate behaviour.

As W.S. was continuously justifying a decision that was made for safety reasons to their executive team with little to no support from their leader, it soon became apparent to W.S. that they were not going to be able to remain with the organization. W.S. noted,

Certainly, at many points in that process, I found myself just thinking, I have to get out.

To be honest, I saw the opportunity to ... put myself in a constructive dismissal situation and so that's the path I took. Ultimately, [another colleague and] I left the organization.

In further unpacking the disillusionment with their leader and organization, W.S. also acknowledged that through this experience, and others, there were some shifts in thinking:

I think ... you leave maybe disillusioned by large organizations and I guess more than anything, what the experience at [several organizations] taught me, is that organizations, they're just a structure—they're meaningless. I guess what it leaves you with is a very deep-rooted sense that loyalty is to people, not to organizations, and that organizations will do, almost universally, what is most expedient for them.

W.S., like all participants in this study, clearly expressed that their disillusionment, whether with the leader, organization, or both, set in immediately after the non-compassionate behaviour was experienced. In cases where the non-compassionate behaviour was addressed by another leader or the participant had an opportunity to make meaning of what happened, the disillusionment was tempered and participants did not leave the organization, at least not immediately after the incident. In cases where there was no opportunity to further explore the meaning of leader non-compassion, participants typically resigned from their organization.

Work-Home Boundary Infringement

One unexpected finding from these narratives of non-compassionate leader behaviour, was what I call “The Line in the Sand,” which refers to how participants reacted much more strongly to leader non-compassion when their leader’s actions impacted not just themselves but also their families. When C.J. was asked by their leader to cut their parental leave short, the anger C.J. felt at this request was mainly because it not only affected them but also their family:

It was even less about me and my time off, but I felt like I owe it to my twins, I owe it to my wife ... I shouldn’t have to justify wanting to spend time with my family; it’s a legal right in Canada to get parental leave.

As a result of further reflection while narrating this story, C.J. noted,

I’m trying to see it [from] his point of view being, like, it’s no different to him than him saying, ‘Well, you can’t go camping this weekend’. Well, no, it’s different than that. I think family means different things to different people at different degrees, and we obviously had a disconnect on what it meant [to me].

In a similar situation, B.S. cut short a long overdue family vacation because their leader demanded it and the line in the sand for B.S. was that this decision impacted not just them, but also their family:

I’ve had lots of leaders show very little compassion ... but in this case, it was not just me; it was me, my family, my son ... circumstances involved with me going down to the States [to take this job].

Through these quotes, it is apparent that there is, in fact, a line in the sand for recipients of non-compassionate leader behaviour.

This finding raises a question about how employees might tolerate a certain amount of non-compassionate behaviour from leaders before they make a change in their working environment, usually by resigning or moving elsewhere in the organization. When non-compassionate leader behaviour goes beyond impacting just the employee and starts affecting family members, participants tolerated a lot less from non-compassionate leaders and more swiftly made a change in their work situation. This is another area that would merit further research.

This section described the most profound deleterious effects of non-compassionate leader behaviour on recipients in corporate workplace settings. The negative impacts of this behaviour ranged from recipients experiencing visceral emotions like anger, shame, humiliation, and isolation to prolonged mental and physical health issues, to crippling self-doubt, to feeling disillusioned with their leader and/or organization. All participants noted that they considered leaving the organization, and some did leave. While the first two sections of this chapter discussed the impacts of compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour, this study also generated findings that traversed stories of both. The next section sheds light on participants' learning from compassion and non-compassion.

Learning from Compassion and Non-Compassion

In addition to the findings discussed above, there were two findings that traversed compassionate and non-compassion leader stories. The first finding is that leadership growth can happen in recipients who experience compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour. The second finding is that participants who took time to reflect on these experiences, as a recipient of either compassionate or non-compassionate leader behaviour, often were able to

reframe the experience, make meaning of it, and then let it go. What is interesting to note is that out of twelve participants, nine expressed either growth or reframing or both in compassionate and/or non-compassionate leader situations. Both findings will be discussed in detail below.

Growth as a Leader

All participants in this study were or had been leaders in medium to large organizations, even though this was not a criterion for participant selection. The benefit of this is that many of the participants indicated that the experience of having leaders that were both compassionate and non-compassionate was that there was learning from both types of experience. This learning was often applied to the participant's direct reports as they moved through their careers and managed larger groups of people. Logic would dictate that participants would learn more from compassionate leaders, but this finding demonstrates that that was not the case. Even though S.C. had an experience where their leader berated them on a phone call at 3:00 AM while they were troubleshooting a technology outage for a client, S.C. noted that they wanted to emulate the behaviour of the compassionate leader who intervened on their behalf:

It was a confirmation that [this leader] was the kind of leader that I wanted to be, so I learned how I wanted my teams to function, and how I wanted the people on my teams to feel about me, and I used the way that he responded and the way he behaved to emulate that as I built teams over the last few years.

As A.D. was thinking about the compassion their leader showed them by giving them a critical project as an opportunity to grow, A.D. articulated how they now use the same strategy with their teams to help employees learn and grow:

It makes me think about what I can do in my current position. I have the ability to give opportunities to people. I have the ability to take those chances with those people. So how do I pay it forward in that sense and give that young leader that opportunity to do this kind of work or that person who really needs that next step in her career? Can I do that for someone else and help them get there?

M.D. spoke about how they learned from both their compassionate and non-compassionate leader experiences. In the case of their compassionate leader story, M.D.'s leader supported them through the loss of their father and even attended the funeral. M.D. articulated how they grew as a leader in the following way:

I think it helped cement in my mind that business ... isn't strictly about transactions and dollars—there are people there. For me, it also helped me see myself wanting to be much like that for people who reported to me. I wanted to show the same level of support for my people in big things and in small things, because they're human.

By the same token, M.D. also indicated that they learned what good leadership looks like from their non-compassionate leader experience. M.D.'s leader, in this story, often projected their disinterest during meetings and tended to discount many of the contributions that M.D. made to the team. From this experience, M.D. noted,

I think it drilled home to me the idea of not controlling someone else, [of] sitting up and being interested. I knew that I had to give people working for me the ability to make their [own] choices and [decide] which way to go. I didn't want to micromanage or confine their contributions.

Similarly, C.J.'s story of leader compassion about how they were supported by their leader after surgery and allowed to take the necessary time to fully recover allowed C.J. to reflect on how this informed their leadership style:

I guess [in] all these situations you reflect on your own leadership style like, "Okay, that's the behaviour I want to do. That's how I want people to feel when they're struggling." And I think I do a good job of that already, but [now I'm] looking for that feedback or affirmation that I do.

M.M. described how they took both the good and the undesirable leadership skills from their stories, and adopted them as part of their repertoire as a leader:

So, I took all the good that they gave me, and I ditched the terrible attitudes that they had; everything that they did do was noted so that I made sure that I didn't do that ... I just did the opposite.

As W.S. was describing how their leadership style was greatly informed by their compassionate leader who was able to alleviate a stressful time for W.S. as they were leading a mission-critical project, it became clear that this was the type of behaviour W.S. intentionally adopted with their direct reports:

In that moment, because of somebody's compassion, you get perspective, you get confidence that they support you and that they'll be with you, [in] success and in failure, and the effect of that is, as an individual, there's a multiplier effect to being compassionate in the sense that the compassion that [my leader] showed me allowed me to take that same position with my team, and it trickles down.

Further to this, W.S. also noted, “I can say as a matter of fact that there were probably half a dozen times in my career where I used that same message with people that I was leading in difficult situations, and it was always true.” In contrast, H.K.’s non-compassionate leader story about how there was no effort made by leaders to debrief those who remained after an entire department was laid off in the organization gave them pause for thought on how not to lead: “I got pretty clear in my own head though, like I think sometimes [what] you learn the most from bad bosses or bad situations is I’m never going to do that.” At the same time, H.K. acknowledged, while these situations can be painful in the moment, we can still learn from them. H.K. described this in how they manage employee layoffs now:

Nobody takes these decisions lightly. We completely understand we’re dealing with people’s lives here. There are things that we do to support them for a softer landing on the other side, and it certainly was a very foundational skill, to some extent. You can’t ever wish you didn’t go through things, because you learned something, so to some extent, I think it probably made me a much better leader when the time came.

This quote from H.K. provides some solace in these stories of non-compassionate leader behaviour in that there can be something learned from painful experiences, even if it is something we vow never to do. The next section will discuss how participants who were able to reflect on their stories often helped to make meaning of the incident and, at times, provided them with the ability to move forward.

Reflection and Reframing

Several of the participants reflected on both their leader compassion and non-compassion stories and, in doing so, were able to reframe the situation and sometimes walk away with a

different perspective. A.D. noted both of their stories provided them with a perspective that people matter more than titles and organizations:

I think it's changed the way I see the world in the sense that it's all about people.

Companies come and go, you may change jobs, but at the end of the day, it's about the people and it's about the relationship and the support that you get within the organization.

That's what truly matters. It's the relationships and it's the support.

In similar fashion, S.C. reflected on their stories and noted, "I think the compassionate side of things actually changed my thought process, changed me, [and] changed the things I did, more so than the non-compassionate side." Even so, S.C. elaborated that while the compassionate leader story was more impactful, there was still something to learn by reflecting on the incident from the non-compassionate leader's perspective:

It's interesting because I was reflecting on this the other day. I actually have a different perspective of him and his approach [and] it's not a bad thing, because after the situation was all over and you get a chance to look back on it and think, okay, what could I have done differently? When I look at the lessons that I learned out of that, he's not wrong.

When he is really hard on people about something, he's not wrong in what he is trying to say. What he is wrong in is how he approaches it, so I learned [but] it wasn't a pleasant learning experience.

Upon reflecting on their non-compassionate leader stories, some participants came to the realization that outcomes could not be controlled, and that the experience helped them to see what they could control. As B.J. reflected on their leader non-compassion story of how the organization did very little to help them move to a different branch, they noted,

It reinforced that for the responsibilities and role that I have, [I] can't be that reliant on others and [I] have to maintain [my] own sense of direction, inner strength, and focus to do the responsibilities effectively. It reinforced that [I] can't depend or rely on someone else for [my] own success. It reinforces [that I've] got to be the driver of [my] own bus.

Similarly, as P.S. was reflecting on their story of leader non-compassion in which their leader blamed them for another member of the team who was underperforming, and even implied that they might have a personality disorder, they were able to better understand how they might manage a similar situation differently if it arose:

Because I've been in so many different situations, especially organizational environments, I think that I would be confident enough to say, "I'm not going to try to change you. If you think that this is okay for you, that's fine, but I know it doesn't have to be this way ... and I know that there are other places that are not this way."

For C.J., reflecting on both of their stories provided an opportunity to articulate that their perspective had changed from having a hard-core view where stress or illness might not have been taken seriously to becoming an advocate for employee mental health:

I think that made me reflect on being a little more present or vocal or champion, like, it's okay to take the time off, and especially where this hits home is around mental health because of the crisis and epidemic we're seeing. And I'm doing this a lot lately telling people it's okay ... let that drop, we'll figure it out. I'll tell the boss the deadline is missed. It's not worth you burning yourself out for it. Work will go on.

It is encouraging to witness the shifts in perspective that have occurred for participants as a result of reflecting on their stories. Not only has there been reframing of mainly the non-

compassionate leader stories, but participants have also applied their learning to how they lead other humans in the corporate workplace. P.S. summarized the struggle to incorporate compassion in the workplace with this quote:

Sometimes, we take an intellectual interest in things, and we want to do it, we want to feel it, but there's a difference between knowing what something is, and how to do it, and feeling it. Empathy and compassion happen on a different level, it's not just in the mind, it's also in the heart, and those two parts have to work together.

Even though we intuitively know that compassion in the workplace is important, participants' stories have demonstrated what it took for them to learn its true value and how they now endeavour to show it to others.

In this chapter, I responded to my second inquiry question by exploring the narratives in detail with respect to how recipients made meaning of their leaders' compassionate and non-compassionate behaviour and the related impact of such actions. In the following chapter, I offer conclusions based on my findings, as well as recommendations for further research and industry practice.

Chapter Six: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

— Maya Angelou

In this chapter, I provide a brief summary of this study, as well as further explore the findings discussed in the previous chapter. Recommendations for additional research, as well as organizational practice of leader compassion in the workplace, will be discussed. Finally, limitations of this study will be addressed. This chapter begins with a brief overview.

A Brief Overview

This qualitative research sought to honour and explore stories of leader behaviour that demonstrate compassion and non-compassion in privately held or publicly traded, for-profit medium to large organizations in Canada and the US. My research questions were as follows:

1. What are recipient stories of perceived compassionate and non-compassionate behaviour by leaders in corporate workplace settings?
2. How do recipients make meaning of perceived compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour in response to their suffering?

In total, 12 participants were recruited using purposive sampling, and they were encouraged to each share one story of compassionate leader behaviour and one story of non-compassionate leader behaviour in individual interviews conducted virtually over Zoom. As such, a total of 24 stories were narrated, transcribed, summarized, and analyzed. A virtual focus group was held with participants once interviews and a preliminary analysis of the data were completed. In the next section, I will delve deeper into a discussion of the findings of how

recipients of compassionate leader behaviour made meaning from these experiences, and what the implications might be for further research.

Compassionate Leader Behaviour

In the narratives of compassionate leader behaviour, there were three key findings that are important to explore further in this section related to existing academic literature. In the compassion literature, many studies focus on the positivity of compassion in the workplace and the outcomes of having compassionate leaders, and for good reason. Compassion in the workplace is scarce, but when it is practiced there are many positive outcomes to employees, leaders, and organizations (Dutton et al., 2014; Lilius et al., 2011; Meechan et al., 2022; Shuck et al., 2019; Worline & Dutton, 2017a), and the academic literature supports this. This section will delve deeper into the benefits of compassionate leader behaviour as illustrated by both the findings and the literature. The first subsection explores how recipients developed a more positive perception of themselves and their work as a consequence of experiencing compassionate leader behaviour; the second subsection discusses how compassionate leader behaviour can encourage loyalty toward leaders; and the final subsection examines how compassion can be a generative force in the workplace.

Positive Perception of Self and Work

One could assume that demonstrating compassion in the workplace would have numerous benefits to those receiving and giving compassion, as well as to organizations. In this study, all participants described experiencing positive thoughts and feelings as recipients of compassionate leader behaviour, although the specific feelings described varied among participants. For example, some participants spoke of feeling valued or supported, or they

described an increase in self-confidence, while others felt there was psychological safety created by their leader's active listening and presence, the freedom to work without fear, or predictability of their leader's behaviour.

In the current literature, common organizational outcomes of compassion in the workplace include increased employee engagement (Worline & Dutton, 2017a), reduced employee turnover (Friedman & Gerstein, 2017), and increased performance (Frost, 2003/2007) among others. It was more challenging to find research that utilized a narrative inquiry approach and focused on individual stories of leader compassion, and how recipients make meaning of the experience. However, Chu (2016), in a study of nurses in Taiwan found, "receiving others' compassion could heighten positive moods, and positive moods could in turn enhance an employee's job performance" (p. 65). Indeed, the participants in this study described heightened affect as a result of compassionate leader behaviour. Multiple participants described enhancement in their job performance due to compassionate leader behaviour and their feelings related to such behaviour. By the same token, Lilius et al. (2008) noted compassion in the workplace leads to a more positive inference of self in that "one is better able to carry on with one's life and work" (p. 207). Participants described enhanced resilience and grit because of their higher self-confidence resulting from compassionate leader behaviour. Dutton et al. (2007) noted experiencing compassion creates positive emotions, and that this increases the willingness to help others, which then "spawns further positive emotions which increases the desire to help even more" (p. 11). This finding is consistent with Fredrickson and Joiner's (2002, 2018) broaden-and-build theory in that positive emotions broaden our way of thinking, which then enables us to experience more positive emotions creating an upward-spiral effect. In other words,

experiencing positive emotions are not just beneficial in the moment: they have longer term benefits. In this study, participants described great willingness to help others, particularly direct reports, arising from their experiences with compassionate leaders. Therefore, the findings of this study strengthen the findings of these aforementioned pieces of scholarship.

Loyalty Towards Leader

Participants described feeling a strong sense of loyalty toward the leader who demonstrated compassionate behaviour. For some, the loyalty expressed was so strong that it bordered on admiration. Several participants noted that they would not hesitate to follow their leader to other organizations, while others indicated being held accountable for their work in a respectful manner, hence, not wanting to disappoint their leader. Still others described being motivated to go above and beyond for their leader without being asked to do so. This finding is supported by Oxley and Wittkower (2011) who noted, “Loyalty involves having the motivation to go above and beyond what is already required by the contract, and involves emotional motivations of care and concern” (p. 229). Leader compassion can drive organizational loyalty as indicated by Banker and Bhal (2019) who noted that organizational policies and practices that convey a caring approach at work encouraged employees to respond with compassion, which fostered trust in the organization and translated into loyalty. Interestingly, participants in this study who expressed loyalty toward their leaders did not explicitly mention also feeling loyal to the organization.

Contrary to the findings of Banker and Bhal (2019), the loyalty expressed by the participants in this study seemed to be very specific to that person but not the organization, although that specific question was not asked of participants. This finding was similar to that

observed by Frost et al. (2000) in that the giving and receiving of compassion sometimes altered the connection between people “with a change in attendant levels of felt trust and reliance” (p. 41). Overall, participants described a deepened connection with the leader and enhanced feelings of trust and reliance due to the compassionate behaviour demonstrated by their leader. Therefore, while participant loyalty was not extended to the organization (Banker & Bhal, 2019), the loyalty expressed toward the leader was greatly enhanced (Frost et al., 2000).

Although this finding of loyalty toward compassionate leaders was unexpected, perhaps it warrants further study as organizations and employees adjust to a post-pandemic world where burnout is rising, employee engagement is falling, and more people are quitting their jobs (Trzeciak et al., 2023). In research conducted by Ford et al. (2023) regarding loyalty between employees and organizations, a crucial factor in gaining employee loyalty is the behaviour of managers. As Ford et al. (2023) explained, it is supervisors “who make visible an organization’s signals to employees” (p. 6) and, in the case of gaining and sustaining employee loyalty to the organization, employees expect more than the bare minimum—they expect to be dealt with in a “fair, honest, considerate, and caring [manner]” (p. 2). Participants in this study supported this finding by expressing loyalty toward their leaders that often lasted many years after being a recipient of compassionate leader behaviour, and for some formed the basis of leadership growth. Even as far back as 1998, Solomon noted the importance of leader compassion in a published paper discussing care and compassion in the workplace that “despite the hardheaded (hardhearted) rhetoric of tough management, compassion would seem to be a minimal requirement for a decent manager” (p. 528). As demonstrated by the findings of this study,

leaders can have significant and lasting impact on direct reports with their everyday actions—what is crucial is that leaders notice suffering and take the time to respond with compassion.

Compassion is Generative

Participants in this study described not only feeling positive emotions as a consequence of compassionate leader behaviour, but they also noted that their leaders' example of compassion modelled the way for them to respond to suffering in others, most notably their direct reports. One participant called this "The Multiplier Effect" (W.S.) to explain how their leader's compassionate behaviour helped them respond compassionately to others' suffering years after the event with their leader. The generative nature of compassion has been demonstrated by several scholars but, first, it would be prudent to briefly discuss what it means to be *generative* since it is a term used in reference to various concepts in the literature. Schön (1993) described generativity as "how we come to see things in new ways" (p. 138) and that "how problems are addressed is powerfully influenced by the metaphors and frames used to describe them" (Bushe, 2013, p. 91); hence, changing how problems are described can lead us to see them differently. Scharmer and Kaufer (2013), in their discussion on how to meet the challenges of our complex world, describe a concept of generative listening as "a space of deep attention that allows an emerging future possibility to 'land' or manifest" (p. 147). In an exploration on emergent learning, Taylor (2011) stated, "It is in the moments when concepts and experiences converge in our attention that we find illumination—insight" (p. 149). Carlsen and Dutton (2011) defined generativity "as strips of experience that bring a feeling of energy and aliveness to people" (p. 15) in their discussion on generativity within qualitative research. There are other definitions of the term generative in the literature; however, the common theme that emerges is that

generativity flourishes when concepts converge with moments of clarity to provide new meaning and, as a result, allow new behaviours and thought patterns to emerge, subsequently leading to what Carlsen and Dutton (2011) referred to as energy and vitality. This emergence of new meaning and behaviour is explored further in the following paragraphs as it relates to the generativity of compassionate leader behaviour in this study.

One explanation for how compassion can be generative may be related to the finding above of recipient loyalty bordering on admiration for the leader who demonstrates compassionate behaviour. In a study on admiration, Schindler et al. (2013) noted participants go through four action tendencies with the goal of imitating the admired person: (a) give praise to the person's skills, virtues or accomplishments, (b) affiliate with the person, (c) internalize the values or goals of the admired person, and (d) imitate the admired person. These four stages demonstrate how a recipient of compassionate leader behaviour can transform their experience into a force for good. To support this, Fisher (2019) noted, "The long-term adaptive function of admiration is to transmit knowledge and values through social learning" (p. 13), which participants in this study have demonstrated.

Cameron et al. (2011) called this powerful phenomenon "amplifying effects" (p. 286) in that those who were recipients of compassion in organizations, or even witnessed compassion, were more likely to help customers and coworkers. Dutton et al.'s (2007) extensive scholarship in this area has shown that compassion is generative in various ways within organizations. For example, Dutton et al. (2007) noted, "Compassion among members of [an] organization generates renewable resources, strengthens values and beliefs, and cultivates skills" (p. 22). In addition, Dutton et al. (2007) stated, "Seemingly trivial actions and expressions of individuals

can have big system-wide effects” (p. 22). To further support this finding, Dutton and Workman (2011) demonstrated that compassionate action “creates a connection that fosters others’ growth and sense of belonging” (p. 404). Indeed, participants in this study described how their leader’s compassion, which typically consisted of small, everyday actions, gave them not only an opportunity to see leader compassion in action but also had a generative quality in that participants learned how to be compassionate leaders to their direct reports.

Taking leadership style into account as a predictor of compassion in healthcare, Ali and Kashif (2020) discovered, “Individuals learn from their leaders, friends, and sense care from the prevailing workplace culture, which can easily trigger feelings of compassion” (p. 810). No doubt, there is a component of personal learning that comes from experiencing or witnessing compassion; however, it is the positivity, warmth, and powerful impact of compassion that seems to motivate individuals to then want to practice leadership in a more compassionate manner going forward. Building on Fredrickson and Joiner’s (2002, 2018) work regarding their broaden-and-build theory, Haidt (2000) noted, indeed, people who experienced acts of human goodness such as kindness and compassion described a warm, uplifting feeling that Haidt called *elevation*, in which a common response is “generalized desires to help others and to become a better person” (p. 3). Furthermore, Haidt (2000) noted this outcome was more than just a positive feeling in the moment, hinting that there might be some cognitive restructuring as participants described life-altering effects long after. Several years later, Haidt (2003) supported this finding by stating, “Powerful moments of elevation sometimes seem to push a mental ‘reset button,’ wiping out feelings of cynicism and replacing them with feelings of hope, love, and optimism and a sense of moral inspiration” (p. 286). Thomson and Siegel (2017) indicated research has

demonstrated that elevation is often accompanied by physiological responses such as feelings of warmth, tingling, chills, and the release of oxytocin. Haidt's (2000, 2003) theory of elevation and its impact is supported by the findings of this study as several participants noted how one event of compassionate leader behaviour was powerful enough to stay with them years later and guide them in their own journeys to respond compassionately to direct reports and peers.

One could theorize that this feeling of elevation in people is what makes compassion generative and, as such, could have far-reaching organizational impact in a positive manner, especially if simply witnessing compassion can have similar benefits. Algoe and Haidt (2009) lend support to this theory by stating that witnessing "other-praising emotions [elevation, gratitude, and admiration] motivate people to do things that create or strengthen relationships, particularly with virtuous or skillful people" (p. 123). By the same token, Cameron et al. (2011) discussed how positive organizational practices fostered positive energy among members and this produced elevated organizational performance. Vianello et al. (2010) utilized Haidt's (2000, 2003) early work and applied it to leadership, asking the question whether the emotion of elevation is a mediator between leaders' and their followers' behaviour. Vianello et al. noted, "The powerful role played in organizations by the positive other-praising emotion of moral elevation, showing that this emotion—rather than happiness, serenity, or positive affect—is responsible of strengthening positive attitudes, and enhancing virtuous organizational behavior" (p. 405). Vianello et al. concluded employees "devote a great deal of attention to their leaders' ethical behavior" (p. 405) and that "moral and emotional meanings are salient and pervasive in organizations and work settings" (p. 405), which would indicate that not only are employees

closely watching their leaders' behaviour, but that witnessing authentic leader compassion could have long-term and far-reaching positive impact for individuals and organizations.

In this section, I explored the key findings of compassionate leader behaviour and how these findings supported existing academic research. In the next section, I will further explore key findings of non-compassionate leader behaviour from this study.

Non-Compassionate Leader Behaviour

In the first section in this chapter, I explored key findings related to compassionate leader behaviour and demonstrated that there are many benefits to leaders showing compassion in the workplace. This chapter now takes a dark turn as I discuss the key findings from narratives of non-compassionate leader behaviour. The narratives of non-compassionate leader behaviour were difficult to read, though necessary to better understand how these actions affected recipients, some for many years following. In Kellerman's (2004) words, "to deny bad leadership equivalence in the conversation and curriculum is misguided, tantamount to a medical school that would claim to teach health while ignoring disease" (p. 11). This study revealed five key findings from the analysis of the non-compassionate leader narratives: suffering, visceral emotions, impact on mental and physical health, impact to family, and disillusionment. Although there has been more research in recent years exploring the dark side of leadership, most notably toxic or harmful leadership, there is limited academic literature on the specific impact to individuals who experience non-compassionate leader behaviour.

There are many definitions in the literature of what behaviours comprise toxic leadership as the research in this area continues to grow. Kellerman (2004) described bad leadership as a continuum from being incompetent to callous to evil, with a variety of behaviours that fall

between these points on the continuum. Lipman-Blumen (2005) noted toxic leaders by virtue of “their *destructive behaviors* and *dysfunctional personal qualities* generate a serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities, and even entire societies they lead” (p. 29). While Kellerman (2004) focused on leader traits and character to explain bad leadership, Frost (2003/2007) acknowledged that toxicity in the workplace can be generated in a variety of ways from causing intentional harm to incompetence or insensitivity to institutional forces that promote or encourage toxicity to thrive. To make this even more complex, there is delineation in the literature between what comprises dysfunctional leadership versus toxic leadership (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). By the same token, Kellerman (2004) differentiated ineffective leadership from unethical leadership, so now there is discussion on whether the harm caused by poor leadership is intentional or simply due to little or no self-awareness.

As Garrick and Buck (2022) noted, “There is no doubt that there are also bad leaders ... who are incompetent, irresponsible, amoral, Machiavellian, self-centered, and even self-serving” (p. 34). Indeed, this covers a wide range of poor, and often extreme, leadership behaviour and an in-depth discussion is well beyond the scope of this study. It could be argued that non-compassionate leader behaviour falls under the umbrella of toxic leadership; however, in considering Frost’s (2003/2007) research on toxicity, it would be more pertinent to assume that non-compassionate leader behaviour might be due to leader incompetence or unawareness rather than a conscious decision to intentionally cause harm or suffering to others. Frost (2003/2007) theorized leaders who lack emotional intelligence may not be attuned to another person’s suffering, or they may not understand why someone’s emotional pain would take priority over

workplace tasks. As a result, their actions often do little to alleviate suffering and, in some cases, cause further, unnecessary suffering. This is similar to what Porath and Pearson (2010) called incivility in the workplace, which is defined as “the exchange of seemingly inconsequential inconsiderate words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct” (p. 64), and include examples such as not listening, belittling others, taking credit for other’s effort, and withholding information, among others. To be clear, intentional or not, suffering at the individual and organizational level occurs as a result of this callousness—something to keep in mind as I explore the key findings of non-compassionate leader behaviour in the following sections.

Suffering

As Worline and Dutton (2017a) stated, “*Suffering* is a heavy word” (p. 1), but it is a word that needs to be normalized in the workplace. There is a popular quote in the compassion literature attributed to Peter Frost (2003/2007), a compassion scholar, who stated, “There is always pain in the room” (p. ix), and the narratives in this study strongly support that statement. Kanov (2021) defined suffering as “the severe or protracted distress people experience when an instance of pain or injury (emotional, physical, or otherwise) disrupts one’s basic personhood” (p. 86). Based on this definition, every single participant in this study described suffering as a result of non-compassionate leader behaviour, and regardless of whether it was expressed as feeling isolated, burned out, dehumanized, or demoralized, the suffering was real.

It is a truism that the brain influences the body and vice versa. Prolonged emotional suffering that is perceived as unacknowledged can increase individual stress, which then can lead to a myriad of health issues. Selye’s (1956/1984) research on stress, which went as far back as the 1940s, was some of the first academic research into the study of the human stress response

from a physiological perspective, and what happens during fight or flight as we attempt to adapt. Selye's work opened the door to other fields, such as psychology and neuroscience, studying stress which paved the way for a groundswell of academic research available today regarding the physiological and psychological impact of stress (Sapolsky, 2015). We now know there is an optimum level of stress that allows us to push through challenging situations or attain meaningful goals. However, as noted by Colligan and Higgins (2006), "Stress can also become burdensome causing one to experience significant emotional distress and physical illness" (p. 90). Current academic literature has linked the effects of prolonged stress to not only psychological illness, such as depression, anxiety, or substance abuse (Quick & Henderson, 2016), but also physical disorders such as cardiovascular disease and stroke (Kivimäki & Kawachi, 2015) and even death (J. Goh et al., 2016). This is not only alarming when personal suffering is considered, but it is also costly to organizations. Porath (2016) stated a study conducted by the American Psychological Association "estimates that workplace stress costs the US economy \$500 billion a year" (p. 16) and, in addition, "a stunning 550 billion workdays are lost each year due to stress on the job" (p. 16). These estimates are staggering and shocking, which lends support to the importance of better understanding individual suffering that occurs as a result of non-compassionate leader behaviour. It would be reasonable to theorize that the result of prolonged individual suffering can lead to stress, and potentially illness, which eventually translates to enormous impact and cost for organizations.

Shining a light, so to speak, on suffering in the workplace is more important now than ever as we slowly emerge from a 2-year global lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To awaken compassion, it is crucial that we acknowledge the pain and suffering that exists in

organizations, whether the suffering is a direct consequence of our work environment or a result of something that happens in our personal lives. Since the first component of compassion as defined by Worline and Dutton (2017a) is to notice that suffering is present then, by definition, there cannot be compassion without first noticing that there is pain and suffering. No matter how much we might like to leave our emotions at the door, when we come into work, we are human and that, by default, means we experience suffering. Frost (1999) stated suffering is a “significant aspect of organizational life” (p. 128) and that, as scholars, we miss so much of the humanity that exists in organizations because we have been trained to view organizations, and the people in them, with a dispassionate eye. Kanov (2021) reiterated the need to open our eyes and hearts to suffering at work and noted that although there is some scholarly work on this of late, there needs to be more research exploring the essential nature of suffering. In a recent study, Ormaechea et al. (2022) noted, “Of the 1, 814 articles reviewed, only twenty-eight of them deal with issues related in some way to the suffering of people in organizations” (p. 72). As such, Kanov (2021) specifically suggested, “Inductive research on the lived experience of suffering in the context of work and organizational life would itself be a worthwhile undertaking” (p. 86), to which this study has made a small contribution.

In practice, there can be a variety of reasons why suffering is not acknowledged at work. It may not be that easy to tell when someone is suffering, particularly because suffering in the workplace is discouraged and often stigmatized (Worline & Dutton, 2017a). Ormaechea et al. (2022) described in their study how leaders acknowledged that they were aware of suffering in their organizations, and although they agree this is a problem, they often did nothing to alleviate suffering. In their recent research, Tietsort et al. (2023) reported employees may feel that

suffering at work should not be disclosed for the following reasons: professionalism concerns, validity and severity of suffering, impact on coworkers if they choose to respond compassionately, and image management or that others will see them differently. Given that suffering is not usually openly expressed at work, it can manifest as other emotions such as anger, withdrawal, repression, impatience or overwhelm, arrogance or power displays or manipulation, indifference, loneliness or alienation, for example (Center for Positive Organizations, 2020). In addition, many people tend to avert their gaze at suffering even when it is recognized because they may not know how to react or comfort someone who is visibly suffering. This combined with the theory that some leaders may not have the emotional intelligence or awareness to notice suffering, likely increases the odds that there is, indeed, always pain in the room as noted by Peter Frost more than 20 years ago.

It is important to recognize that while some types of suffering in the workplace are inevitable, others are not. Kanov (2021) differentiated between inevitable and preventable suffering in the workplace, in that inevitable suffering is a result of situations such as loss of loved ones, health or relationship issues, or catastrophic environmental disasters. Preventable suffering, on the other hand, is caused by systems and organizations, and includes poorly executed change efforts, abusive supervisors, resource constraints, and unreasonable workloads, for example (Kanov, 2021). Indeed, as Kanov (2021) noted, “Unlike suffering associated with the natural rhythms of life and work, organizationally induced or exacerbated suffering is not inevitable; it is a byproduct of contrived systems, processes, and conditions, and it is thus preventable” (p. 87). Livne-Tarandach et al. (2021) acknowledged the role organizations sometimes play in suffering in a conceptual paper on organizational healing by noting, “An

additional stream of research has explored organizational healing in the face of trauma caused by internal sources within an organization ... [such as] practices that enable harm, wrongdoing, incivility, or discrimination” (p. 377). Every single participant in this study, who described a story of non-compassionate leader behaviour, endured suffering that was preventable. As a matter of fact, for 10 of the 12 participants, their leaders not only failed to show compassion in the face of suffering, but these leaders caused participants’ suffering where there was none previously. This finding is significant because there is a link between suffering, stress, and illness as shown above. Not only is this costly in many ways to each person who endures preventable suffering in the workplace, it is also incredibly costly to organizations and society.

Visceral Emotions

Participants in this study described feeling a variety of raw and powerful emotions as recipients of leader non-compassion; emotions such as anger or rage, bewilderment, or disbelief at how they were treated, shame or humiliation, or feeling isolated or abandoned by their leaders. Several participants were brought to tears. Much like suffering, emotions are pervasive in the workplace. This is not surprising, especially considering situations in which we are not treated in ways we expect, or in ways that are not aligned with our values. Emotions are complex, and what we observe is often just the tip of the iceberg. Fisher (2019) clarified Scherer’s (2005) definition of an emotion as “an organized system of feelings, physiological responses, bodily expressions, and action tendencies that flow from an almost instantaneous appraisal of a current situation’s relevance to the individual” (p. 2). Much of the research conducted on emotion has focused on negative emotions rather than positive emotions (Fisher, 2019), and this was anecdotally observed in the literature searches conducted for this dissertation. One reason for this is

“negative states such as depression and stress and emotions such as anger and fear are highly relevant to individual mental health as well as to society and thus have been extensively studied by clinical and social psychologists” (Fisher, 2019, p. 3). Another reason is that negative emotions are less common, so they tend to be more memorable than positive emotions, and negative emotions also seem to last longer and are felt more intensely (Fisher, 2019). Baumeister et al. (2001) noted there is a “preponderance of words for bad emotions, contrasted with the greater frequency of good emotions, suggests that bad emotions have more power” (p. 355). As research into toxic, rude, or uncivil workplaces continues to grow, this may also be why researchers are more focused on negative emotions in organizations.

Although emotions are commonly referred to as positive or negative, this binary classification implicitly assigns value to emotions as “good” or “bad” and is limiting. As David (2016) noted, all emotions are valid, and they are data for us to interpret; feeling negative emotions is part of being human. How we decide to behave based on that information is where the complexity of emotion is most evident. This is supported by Baumeister et al. (2007) in a study that concluded, “The role of full-blown emotion seems mainly to act as input into the cognitive control of behavior” (p. 194). Early research on emotions only considered valence (Harmon-Jones, 2019; Harmon-Jones et al., 2012). In other words, the main consideration was whether the emotion was positive (joy, happiness, etc.) or negative (anger, fear, etc.). Subsequent research began to consider the complexity of emotion, in that the same emotion did not always result in the same action and was dependent on the situation. According to Harmon-Jones (2019), other factors in addition to valence were at play such as the intensity of the emotion, approach motivation (approach vs. withdraw), and cognitive processes. In other words, emotion in the

workplace is often the result of a complex evaluation which takes into consideration how strongly someone feels about the situation, and whether to act.

There is a dearth of academic literature that specifically explores recipient emotions as a result of non-compassionate leader behaviour; however, it is reasonable to draw parallels from other work-related situations that cause harm to recipients, such as lack of care by leaders, rudeness, incivility, bullying, and toxic leadership (Almeida et al., 2021). Bhandarker and Rai (2018) found subordinates coping with toxic leaders reported experiencing three levels of emotional distress: first, there was agitation (which included anger), then there was withdrawal, and finally a loss of self-worth. These findings are consistent with the emotions that participants in this study described as a result of non-compassionate leader behaviour. Taking this further, Fida et al. (2014) found experiencing stressors at work, such as interpersonal conflict, was positively related to experiencing negative emotions which then increased moral disengagement and, subsequently, counterproductive work behaviours. While none of the participants in this study described engaging in counterproductive work behaviours against either the organization or individuals, if not addressed one can see how negative emotions and distress over a prolonged period can lead to inappropriate action. Similarly, Giorgi et al. (2016) discovered psychological distress mediated the negative relationship between workplace bullying and the ability to self-manage emotions and impulses. Not surprisingly, Anasori et al. (2020) in a recent study stated, “Workplace bullying predicted psychological distress significantly, which in turn positively influenced emotional exhaustion” (p. 79). These studies linking negative emotions as a result of experiencing a variety of workplace actions when employees feel not cared for by their leaders supports the findings of this study.

It is interesting to note that negative emotions appear to be more persistent than positive emotions, or as Baumeister et al. (2001) noted, “bad is stronger than good” (p. 354) across a wide range of psychological phenomena. For example, bad events have longer lasting consequences than good ones, and negative emotions have stronger effects on cognition (Baumeister et al., 2001). Porath (2016) described a concept first introduced by Hallowell (1997) called *brain burn*, which can occur after an unpleasant or difficult situation is experienced. Depending on the situation and how it is interpreted by the recipient or observer, “a rush of emotions can cause physiological responses ... and a flooding of intense emotions” which increases adrenaline and can “burn a hole in the brain, creating a permanent ‘tattoo’” (Porath, 2016, p. 44). It would be reasonable to expect that this would occur only with traumatic, life-or-death events, but Porath (2016) insisted that is not the case: “Relatively minor incidents—when people thoughtlessly put down others, for instance, or question their capabilities publicly—leave an imprint, whittling away at them, their performance, and their well-being” (p. 45). This is significant and was supported by the findings of this study. It was not uncommon for participants to describe feeling triggered years later by their story of non-compassionate leader behaviour. It truly did seem as though these incidents had been burned into the brain, or as one participant described it: “It’s what gets seared in your mind forever” (A.M.). Some participants were triggered by simply telling their stories of non-compassion, while others could feel those same emotions rising to the surface as they described how their leaders did not respond with compassion to their suffering. Hallowell (1997) noted *brain burn* can happen as a result of broken trust or loss of faith and delving into stories like this can reveal a deep trauma. This concept of broken trust will be explored more fully in the following section of this chapter.

Impact on Mental and Physical Health

In the previous chapter, participants explained how their mental and physical health was affected as a consequence of their leader's non-compassionate behaviour, some for years after. It was common for participants to describe a variety of symptoms such as feeling generalized stress, not sleeping well, increased anxiety, feeling worn down, increased self-doubt, and not performing optimally at work. This section will focus on how the impact of stress, as a result of non-compassionate leader behaviour, affects the mental and physical health of recipients who experienced non-compassionate leader behaviour and were suffering.

The relationship between suffering and stress has been established in the previous two sections, and through substantial academic literature. It is not surprising that leader non-compassion, and other forms of dysfunctional leader behaviour or incivility, can have negative consequences for individual health and well-being. Leiter et al. (2015), in a meta-analysis exploring workplace incivility and well-being, noted that there is little research on the impact of incivility to physical health; however, the few studies that do exist have shown both direct and indirect impact to physiological health. Participants in this study not only described feeling a variety of emotions immediately following leader non-compassion, but there were also longer-term impacts to their physical and mental health as a result.

Several participants in this study reported sleep disturbances and other somatic complaints months after experiencing leader non-compassion. Although loss of sleep, or the inability to obtain good quality sleep, might not seem critical, studies have demonstrated that lack of sleep, often due to psychological distress, can lead to other issues such as an increase in accidents and decreased performance at work (Furuichi et al., 2020). Indeed, Barnes and Watson

(2019) emphasized corporations should be paying more attention to the effects of poor sleep as this can lead to impaired health outcomes (e.g., disease, presenteeism), performance related outcomes (work disengagement, decision errors), and interpersonal outcomes (e.g., social loafing, abusive supervision). C. Fritz et al. (2019) stated, “Workplace incivility, as an interpersonal stressor, is linked to employee as well as partner insomnia through negative work rumination” (p. 1). In a widely cited article, Nixon et al. (2011) performed a meta-analysis exploring various job stressors and their relationship to physical symptoms. Although there was a strong association between a variety of workplace stressors and physical symptoms, Nixon et al. specifically noted that gastrointestinal problems and sleep disturbances were related to more stressors than other physical complaints. Needless to say, sleep is more important than is fully realized, both for individuals and organizations, and it appears to be related to a number of work stressors.

Feeling worn down or emotionally exhausted was another symptom that participants described as a consequence of experiencing non-compassionate leader behaviour. Much like sleep disturbances, emotional and physical exhaustion can occur as a result of workplace distress. Abalkhail (2022) found emotional exhaustion occurred in employees who were coping with dysfunctional leaders, and this not only contributed to lower job satisfaction but, more importantly, employee burnout and a cascading effect into family life. Anasori et al. (2020) considered “workplace bullying as a stressor that triggers one’s gradual increase of distress and found that it affects an employee [*sic*] emotional exhaustion which is a core element of burnout” (p. 79). By the same token, Wu and Hu (2009) in their study on abusive supervision and employee emotional exhaustion demonstrated that the two were positively related. As noted in

other studies, emotional exhaustion is related to work performance and turnover and is a core element of burnout (Wu & Hu, 2009). Much like sleep disturbances, feeling emotionally exhausted as a result of poor leader behaviour, or in this case non-compassion, has potentially harmful impacts for employees and organizations.

Another interesting finding was increased self-doubt, or decreased self-esteem, among participants in this study directly related to experiencing non-compassionate leader behaviour. For some participants, this translated into questioning their work skills and decisions, or not being able to recall details of the specific event with their leader. For others, this was described as a longer lasting decrease in self-esteem related to work, and other areas of their lives. In the literature, decreased self-esteem is often discussed in conjunction with other stress symptoms as an outcome of dealing with toxic or dysfunctional leaders, or incivility in the workplace. For example, Abalkhail (2022) noted employees reported low self-esteem when coping with dysfunctional leaders who marginalized or devalued their work efforts, or excluded them from work activities. Similarly, Adiyaman and Meier (2022), in a study on the effects of incivility in the workplace on mood and self-esteem, found those who experienced high levels of incivility reported higher levels of depressive mood and lower levels of self-esteem compared to those who experienced low levels of incivility.

In another study on the effects of coping with toxic leadership, Bhandarker and Rai (2018) described how employees progressed through three stages of dealing with harmful leadership behaviour: agitation, withdrawal, and loss of self-worth which can ultimately lead to low self-esteem. When employees reached the third stage of coping, Bhandarker and Rai postulated, “When there is no hope of the situation changing, there is no effort made to cope”

(p. 73), and this can lead to increased presenteeism and disengagement. Although decreased self-esteem may not seem worrisome at first, research has shown there are some potentially serious outcomes of unresolved low self-esteem. In the psychology literature, robust research has demonstrated support for the vulnerability model which links low self-esteem to depression (Orth & Robins, 2013; Orth et al., 2016). While there is not a causal link between self-esteem and depression, Orth and Robins (2013) noted the “vulnerability effect is robust and holds across a wide range of samples and study designs” (p. 456). Whelpley and McDaniel (2015), in a meta-analysis linking low self-esteem to increased counterproductive work behaviour, stated that self-esteem has also been “empirically and theoretically connected” (p. 851) to self-efficacy, job performance, and life satisfaction among other outcomes. Orth and Robins (2013) emphasized that their research “counters the notion that self-esteem is an empty construct that has no long-term impact” (p. 459), and this study supports that statement. Participants in this study lend support to the idea that low self-esteem resulting from non-compassionate leader behaviour can have lasting effects. For some participants, low self-esteem called into question their decision-making or work skills; in other participants, loss of self-esteem led to depressive symptoms years later and was a trigger for previous childhood trauma.

It is important to briefly acknowledge that several participants in this study described what could be interpreted as symptoms of posttraumatic stress as a result of non-compassionate leader behaviour. One participant acknowledged the onset of clinical depression months after the event; another participant experienced nightmares of their leader’s behaviour years later; and, finally, a third indicated their leader’s behaviour surfaced past trauma that they were then forced to resolve again. The definition of posttraumatic stress is that it consists of four clusters of

symptoms: (a) re-experiencing the event such as flashbacks or nightmares, (b) negative mood or cognition, (c) avoidance of trauma-related triggers, and (d) hyperarousal or hypervigilance to threat (Banks et al., 2015). Considering this definition, posttraumatic stress is often thought to be a consequence of one acute incident; however, Bond et al. (2010) demonstrated chronic situations, such as workplace bullying, can trigger posttraumatic stress symptoms in recipients, and there is growing research in the literature to support this. Although this study did not explore workplace bullying, incivility, or dysfunctional leadership in depth, it would be reasonable to assume that some stories of leader non-compassion were commingled with other harmful leader behaviours and, as a result, created chronic stressful situations for participants, making it difficult to isolate the consequences of non-compassionate behaviour.

Disillusionment

A common finding among participants in this study as recipients of non-compassionate leader behaviour was that of immediate leader disillusionment or disenchantment and, for some participants, a noted increase in organizational cynicism. In narrating their stories of non-compassionate leader behaviour, every participant noted how they had immediately lost trust in their leader, were disappointed in their leader's actions, and some expressed anger. Cha and Edmondson (2006) defined disenchantment as "a transition in which feelings of violation—a particular blend of disappointment and anger emotions—and loss of trust in the leader have undermined enthusiasm generated earlier by the leader's emphasis on organizational values" (p. 60), and this is demonstrated in many of the narratives in this study. For some participants, these emotions spilled over into how they viewed their organization decreasing affective commitment. In a meta-analysis on affective commitment, Mercurio (2015) defined affective

commitment as “the emotional attachment to an organization as manifested by an individual’s identification with, and involvement in, that organization” (p. 397). Caza and Cortina (2007) noted, “Increased psychological distress and decreased satisfaction with the institution both fostered disengagement from that institution” (p. 346) and this was observed in the narratives of this study. In fact, these incidents of non-compassionate leader behaviour prompted some participants to leave their team or organization soon after the incident, while others made plans to leave in the future.

The disillusionment or disenchantment expressed by participants in their leaders can be explained by leader behavioural integrity theory, which is defined as an “observer’s perception of the extent to which an actor’s words and actions do or do not align, and it is an ascribed trait” (Simons et al., 2022, p. 366). In other words, behavioural integrity is determined when the observer *perceives* that there is alignment, or not, between the leader’s words and actions. Similarly, some scholars refer to this disconnect of words and actions as leader hypocrisy (Greenbaum et al., 2015; Henkel & Ade, 2022); however, Simons et al. (2012) maintained these are slightly different constructs. As such, numerous studies have demonstrated that when there is inconsistency between a leader’s words and actions, there are negative outcomes for the individual leader and potentially the organization. Simons et al. (2015) reported this inconsistency in a leader’s behaviour can spill over into how one views the organization, making it less desirable to the observer, since “leaders are often vivid representatives of their companies for employees” (p. 834). Behavioural integrity has been shown to have a strong association with follower trust as well as organizational commitment (Simons et al., 2015; Simons et al., 2022), in that when behavioural integrity is high (i.e., leader words align with actions), subordinate trust

and organizational commitment is high and vice versa. J. H. Fritz et al. (2013) found a similar association with behavioural integrity and organizational commitment, though cynicism was found to mediate this relationship in their study.

Loss of trust in one's leader, and potentially an organization, is a problem with human and financial costs to organizations. According to Mishra and Mishra (2012), trust is essential in organizations as it allows for interdependence between two parties without formal agreements. Trust also requires vulnerability since the parties involved to get work done must rely on each other without guarantees that each will uphold their end of the task at hand (Mishra & Mishra, 2012). In addition, Kutsyuruba and Walker (2017) noted there is risk involved in trust as there is a "possibility that the trusting party will experience some costs or damage if the other party proves untrustworthy" (p. 135). Trust is fundamental to organizational processes, yet it seems that trust is easily violated, typically by leaders and often with one incident (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017) as has been demonstrated by the narratives in this study. There are many consequences of low trust environments such as provoking feelings of insecurity and anxiety, unsafe working environments, and employees engaging in self-protective actions rather than working collaboratively, among others (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017). Taking into consideration the narratives of this study, one of the biggest issues of distrust in leaders is that it may lead to a decrease in affective commitment and, potentially, intent to quit. Simons et al. (2022), in a recently published meta-analysis, stated that trust and affective commitment often mediated the relationship between behavioural integrity and several critical outcomes such as effective implementation of organizational initiatives, job performance, organizational citizenship behaviour, and turnover to name a few. According to Davis and Rothstein (2006) in their meta-

analysis on the effects of perceived leader behavioural integrity on employee attitudes, although there might be a tendency not to be overly concerned with isolated non-compassionate leader behaviours that occur in an organization, it is worth noting that even small actions “manifest themselves in the attitudes and behaviors of employees who observe them” (p. 407). Therefore, although leader behavioural integrity may not seem like a vast organizational issue at first glance, one can see how observing repeated low behavioural integrity by leaders could have dire consequences as distrust spreads and takes a firm hold over time.

A construct that is worth briefly exploring here as it relates to leader and organizational disillusionment in this study is affective commitment. Not all participants noted feeling disillusioned or disenchanted with the organization, but some participants did indicate that they were not as committed to the organization as they were before they experienced their leader’s non-compassionate behaviour. Some participants noted feeling as though the organization no longer looked out for them and that it was up to them to look out for themselves, which would indicate a shift from putting organizational goals first to now engaging in more self-protective behaviour. This shift could be explained by conservation of resources theory, which states that individuals develop coping mechanisms, such as lowered affective commitment or disengagement, to avoid further loss and depletion of resources (Thanacoody et al., 2014); however, a more thorough exploration of this theory is beyond the scope of this study.

It is important to briefly differentiate low affective commitment from organizational cynicism. Organizational cynicism is most often defined in the literature as

a negative attitude toward one’s employing organization, comprising three dimensions: (1) a belief that the organization lacks integrity; (2) negative affect toward the

organization; and (3) tendencies to disparaging and critical behaviors toward the organization that are consistent with these beliefs and affect. (Dean et al., 1998, p. 345)

Although affective commitment and organizational cynicism appear similar, the one distinguishing feature is that organizational cynicism includes making disparaging remarks about the organization (i.e., badmouthing), and this behaviour was not noted in any participant narratives in this study; therefore, affective commitment seems to be a better fit for what participants had described. On that note, Mercurio (2015) noted some interesting developments in the literature over the past 20 years with respect to affective commitment: (a) affective commitment can be considered “a core essence” (p. 409) of organizational commitment; and (b) “affective commitment is more predictive of major organizational consequences such as turnover, absenteeism, and organizational citizenship behaviors” (p. 409) than other constructs of organizational commitment. In other words, low affective commitment appears to be a strong predictor of employee disengagement due to disenchantment, and intent to quit. Furthermore, with respect to antecedents of affective commitment, positive perceptions of organizational practices, such as organizational support and trust, appear to influence levels of affective commitment (Mercurio, 2015).

As demonstrated in this section and by the findings of this study, employee affective commitment is tied to leader trust which is influenced by leader behavioural integrity. This finding is supported by Davis and Rothstein (2006), who noted, “When managers demonstrate greater behavioral integrity, employees are more satisfied with their job, with the organization’s leadership, and are more committed to the organization” (p. 417). These findings from my research and the supporting literature demonstrate that affective commitment is an important

indicator of whether employees are emotionally connected to their organization and, as such, seems to weigh heavily in the decision to remain with the organization or leave.

Work-Home Boundary Infringement

For two participants in this study, an interesting finding came to light through their stories of non-compassionate leader behaviour. Although this was not a common finding among participants, it is worth some exploration because of the pattern that was uncovered. Both participants narrated a story whereby their leaders either asked them to cut a long overdue vacation short to handle a crisis, or their parental leave was shortened. The interesting finding was that these two participants reacted with anger at how their leader's non-compassionate behaviour not only impacted them but, more importantly, their families. In fact, both participants implied that they would have tolerated their leaders' request, albeit with annoyance, had it only impacted them. However, a line was crossed when participants realized how their partners and children also suffered as a result. This was enough reason for one participant to ultimately leave the organization, and the other participant seriously considered resigning but decided to stay.

It is not surprising that there is limited research that investigates how recipients of non-compassionate leader behaviour make meaning of suffering when it spills over to their home life and affects family or loved ones. There is, however, some recent research that explores how employees respond to boundary violations between work and home. Kreiner et al. (2009) defined work-home boundary violation as "an individual's perception that a behavior, event, or episode either breaches or neglects an important facet of the desired work-home boundary" (p. 713). Suazo et al. (2005) reported when the psychological contract between employee and employer is breached, employees often feel anger, injustice, resentment, and distrust when they perceive the

organization has not honoured their part of the contract. In fact, Suazo et al. noted, in some cases, “employees are likely to perceive the imbalance to be so great or the chance of future mistreatment to be high enough that they decide to seek employment elsewhere” (p. 26), and this was the case for at least one participant in this study.

In a more recent study by Carvalho et al. (2021) on teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic, reported work-home boundary violations “revealed a direct and positive relationship with burnout and a negative relationship with flourishing, pointing to their detrimental effect for well-being” (p. 11). This is supported by McCartney et al. (2023) in a study on the impact to subordinates of supervisor off-work boundary infringements. Supervisor intrusions during non-work hours was positively related to job tension and depressed work mood (McCartney et al., 2023), and this may be because continuous violations of the work-home boundary by leaders create the perception in subordinates that work never ends and will continue to spill over into home life, eventually impacting family. Although it is challenging to draw parallels from these studies, it is reasonable to assume that this finding of how participants reacted to this infringement can partially be explained by boundary theory, or psychological contract breach by their leaders. As mentioned, this was not a common finding among participants in this study, though it might be worth exploring in future research.

This section explored the key findings of non-compassionate leader behaviour and how these findings supported existing academic research. The next section will further explore key findings that were observed across both compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour narratives in this study.

Learning from Compassion and Non-Compassion

The first section in this chapter explored key findings from compassionate leader narratives in this study, while the second section discussed non-compassionate leader narratives. This section will examine two findings that emerged from both compassionate and non-compassionate leader narratives: growth as a leader, and the capacity of participants to reflect and reframe.

Growth as a Leader

Personal growth as an outcome from positive experiences is not surprising. In fact, there are findings from this study that demonstrate this well. What I did not expect to find in this study is the notion that growth and learning can also happen when we are faced with stressful or adverse situations. In this study, seven of the twelve participants described how both compassionate and non-compassionate leader narratives helped them grow as leaders: three participants described growth from compassionate leader behaviour, while three participants described growth from both compassionate and non-compassion leader behaviour, and one participant noted growth from their non-compassionate leader narrative. This is not to say that the remaining five participants did not grow or learn, only that they did not explicitly describe this in the interviews.

The growth experienced by participants in this study as a result of *compassionate* leader behaviour was acquired by observing how their leader responded to their suffering, and in some cases to others' suffering, as well. As a result of this, many of the participants learned to respond in a compassionate manner to their direct reports when they noticed suffering. The way in which participants described this growth and learning as a result of this modeled behaviour is difficult

to describe, other than to say it seemed to glow and emphasized the admiration (discussed in a previous section) that participants had for their leaders. In essence, this positive growth as described by participants might be considered thriving, which is a part of human flourishing and is defined as “the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work” (Porath et al., 2022, p. 2). There is extensive evidence in the literature on the positive outcomes of thriving in the workplace, such as better health, increased individual work productivity, contagion to others in the workplace, and that thriving provides an indication of self-development or growth, for example (Spreitzer & Sutcliffe, 2007; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Z. Goh et al. (2019), in a meta-analysis on thriving at work, reported that thriving is a multi-level construct that not only has positive outcomes for individuals, but there are positive organizational outcomes, as well. In fact, collective thriving was more likely to occur in teams with servant and authentic leaders, and collective thriving promoted team-member exchange (Z. Goh et al., 2019). Moreover, Kleine et al. (2019), in another meta-analysis of thriving in the workplace, noted, “Thriving exhibits incremental predictive ability above and beyond positive affect and work engagement, for task performance, job satisfaction, subjective health, and burnout” (p. 992). Although this study did not purposely explore thriving at work, it is thought-provoking that the concept of thriving may have been observed as a consequence of leader compassion. This finding illustrates the generative power of compassion. It is hopeful to imagine that a small act of compassion by one leader can spread exponentially in and across organizations as compassionate behaviour is modeled over and over.

The growth described by participants from *non-compassionate* leader behaviour in this study, on the other hand, might be best explained by posttraumatic growth, which is defined as

“a transformative positive change that can come about as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” (Maitlis, 2020, p. 396). Lim and DeSteno (2022) stated that research on adversity demonstrated that while some individuals experience psychological dysfunction, others may grow from adversity. Posttraumatic growth is a construct that has been researched more so in the past 25 years; however, studies have typically been concerned with personal trauma such as bereavement, medical problems, or interpersonal violations more so than work-related trauma (Maitlis, 2012, 2020). Studies that have explored work-related trauma typically confined the scope to professions that inherently involved trauma such as police officers, the military, and disaster/rescue work (Maitlis, 2020). Maitlis (2020) has called for more research into posttraumatic growth as a result of dealing with adversity in the context of “ordinary” (p. 400) work since “trauma is often present in organizational life” (p. 400) as evidenced by studies on bullying, toxic leadership, incivility, and this study on leader non-compassionate behaviour. What makes posttraumatic growth different from other related growth concepts, such as resilience, thriving or flourishing, is that posttraumatic growth “entails transformation, in a way that is less prominent in thriving or flourishing, and this transformation comes through the struggle with significant adversity” (Maitlis, 2020, p. 399). In other words, as the result of a distressing challenge that often shatters assumptions and core beliefs, posttraumatic growth—like transformative learning theory to be further discussed below (Mezirow, 1997, 2012)—can occur provided that the distress is managed and emotions are regulated, which then provides an opportunity for the individual to make sense of the experience and, over time, create a new narrative (Dursun & Söylemez, 2020; Maitlis, 2020). Taking this one step further, Livne-Tarandach et al. (2021) posited, although much of the posttraumatic growth literature is focused

on healing at the individual level, it is possible for posttraumatic growth practices to be applied at an organizational level by reframing how organizations can go beyond remedying harm or suffering and “play an active role in healing as a ‘bounce forward’ opportunity” (p. 393), thereby demonstrating an element of growth rather than just repair. Some may contend that the participants in this study did not experience trauma as a result of leader non-compassion; however, I would disagree as evidenced by the section on symptoms of PTSD above in this chapter. Many of the participants described situations that clearly traumatized them, disrupted their assumptive world, had lasting effects, and required them to make meaning of the incident in order to move forward.

The participants in this study who described growth from these experiences learned how to be better leaders from being recipients of compassionate and non-compassionate behaviour; however, the learning from each of these narratives was different. With compassionate leader behaviour, participants noted wanting to model their leader, and many did just that as they progressed through their career. There was a positivity about the learning experience, one that participants wanted to share, and this is the generative nature of compassion—or the multiplier effect as described by W.S. With respect to the narratives of non-compassion, learning occurred but it was more about what *not* to do as a leader, and how not to treat others. The learning was still valuable, though it was not pleasant, nor as inspiring or generative as the learning described from the compassion narratives.

Reflection and Reframing

An expected finding was that several participants in this study were able to reflect on their narratives as recipients of leader compassion and non-compassion and reframe their

experiences, with psychological distancing. Some were able to take their leader's perspective and come to a different understanding about what had unfolded, while others reflected more generally on their careers and work.

There is literature exploring both positive and negative outcomes of self-reflection in the workplace. Faller et al. (2020), in discussing reflection within the context of workplace learning, noted, "Reflection is useful when we encounter volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous situations where there is not one obvious solution" (p. 250). It would be fair to say that most, if not all, of the non-compassionate leader narratives in this study created uncertainty and volatility for the recipients. Kross et al. (2023) stated self-reflection at work can lead to positive outcomes such as increased performance, enhanced health and well-being, and it can encourage people to become more helpful toward others. Of course, there are also negative consequences to self-reflection, typically stemming from situations where one has been mistreated, and these include decreased performance when self-reflection turns into worrying or rumination, poorer physical and emotional well-being from ruminating which can then be detrimental to relationships (Kross et al., 2023). Reflecting on positive work experiences has other benefits, such as mediating the association between meaningful work and affective commitment in organizations (Jiang & Johnson, 2018).

The other unexpected finding related to this is that reflection of the compassionate or non-compassionate leader narratives led some participants to then shift their thinking to better understand their leader's perspective. In the literature, this is referred to as perspective-taking and is defined as "an essential cognitive resource that protects employees by (a) placing observers in a position to understand the motives of those observed, and (b) allowing for changes

in thoughts and behaviours resulting from such heightened mindfulness and awareness” (McCartney et al., 2023, p. 2). Perspective-taking often leads to a response of empathy and concern for others (Longmire & Harrison, 2016, 2018; McCartney et al., 2023), although some researchers have noted that perspective-taking does not always lead to prosociality (Sassenrath et al., 2022), and this was observed in the findings of my research where some participants were able to shift their thinking and incorporate perspective-taking while others were not.

It would be logical to speculate that participants in this study reflected on their experiences months or years after, which may have led to engagement in perspective-taking, and which ultimately led to the construction of new meaning about their narratives, and possibly their leaders. Faller et al. (2020) noted how the outcomes of reflection are dependent on one’s perspective. As such, reflective activities from a constructivist lens, which is my approach, “engage the learner in revisiting and re-interpreting the meaning of experiences” (Faller et al., 2020, p. 251). Mezirow’s (2012) work on transformative learning incorporated reflection into the process of re-examining beliefs and perspectives to develop more inclusive, open, and discriminating frames of reference. Mezirow (2012) also noted, “A defining condition of being human is our urgent need to understand and order the meaning of our experience, to integrate it with what we know to avoid the threat of chaos” (p. 73). Mansfield (2022) reported, through reflective meaning-making of our experiences, we learn and change not only by having the experiences themselves but by gaining new insights about them, and this leads to wisdom.

The acquisition of individual wisdom from self-reflection brings up an interesting construct that is beyond the scope of this research. It is, however, important to mention that, in the literature, reflection is a core component of wisdom, although as Weststrate and Glück

(2017) noted, “It is still somewhat unclear whether reflection is an antecedent, defining aspect, correlate, or outcome of wisdom” (p. 802). Nonetheless, there is support for the notion that reflection leads to growth and wisdom (Glück et al., 2022; Mansfield, 2022; Weststrate & Glück, 2017), which is somewhat of a positive outcome when considering the narratives of the participants in this study, particularly those of leader non-compassion. As Mansfield (2022) noted, “If adversity is a fulcrum, narrative meaning-making is a force on the level that may foster wisdom development ... and what one takes away [from experiences], through meaning-making, matters for future functioning” (p. 93). All participants in this study described some form of reflection and meaning-making about their narratives, though not all participants demonstrated perspective-taking to evaluate what their leaders might have been experiencing at the time. The ability to reflect and reframe is often not an easy path to happiness; it is more about the growth and wisdom that can be gained by reflecting on an incident after the fact, engaging in perspective-taking or meaning-making, and then being open to the possibility that our existing assumptions and beliefs may have been incorrect.

This section explored the key findings of non-compassionate leader behaviour and how existing academic research supported these findings. The next section will discuss recommendations for future research and organizational practice, as well as concluding statements about this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined recipients’ experiences resulting from compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour in corporate workplace settings using narrative inquiry. As with most research, more questions are raised than answers provided, and this study was no exception.

Although there is substantial research exploring compassion in the workplace, there is very little research that takes a deep dive into suffering, specifically as a result of non-compassion, at the individual level. Some research exists that demonstrates the outcomes of suffering, but most discuss issues at the organizational level. To truly understand what it means to suffer, it is crucial that researchers delve deeper into individual narratives of compassion and non-compassion in the workplace and how sufferers make meaning of both responses. In support of this, Dutton et al. (2014) noted, “We need to know much more about the sufferer in the compassion process” (p. 295). Kanov (2021) noted this gap in the literature by stating that this lack of research into suffering “has resulted in a lack of clarity about the construct of suffering itself as well as a dearth of theorizing that has prevented us from developing an understanding of how suffering influences and is influenced by other organizationally meaningful phenomena” (p. 86). As researchers, if we do not purposely uncover suffering in the workplace and understand how the sufferer makes meaning of the experience or how they move forward, then how can we acknowledge that lived experience?

Another potential opportunity for further research is the exploration of compassion and non-compassion in privately held or publicly traded, for-profit organizations. There is an ever-growing volume of research in health care and teaching, as well as not-for-profit organizations, but very little in corporate workplaces. It is not unreasonable to assume that compassion and non-compassion would unfold similarly across industries or organizations. At the same time, however, it is only possible to know this for certain by conducting further research in for-profit businesses and delving into whether suffering is revealed, how it is revealed, and whether compassion and non-compassion unfold in the same way as professions, such as health care or

teaching, where the expectation is that there will be an abundance of compassion by nature of the work.

Lastly, it would be helpful if there were a word or phrase in the research community that describes non-compassion in the workplace. This is important for two reasons: first, searching for literature when there is no common terminology for a construct makes it difficult to locate relevant research (as noted in Chapter 2); second, more to the point above, referring to the opposite of compassion as non-compassion does not do justice to those who suffer and are not treated compassionately by their leaders in the workplace. A noted lack of compassion is more than an absence of something—it is an introduction of something else; it is a wounding, hurtful constellation of emotions and consequences for the sufferer. As one of the participants in this study noted, a lack of leader compassion feels “like something gets ripped away” (B.J.), which would imply that there is a personal loss for the sufferer to contend with and make meaning of. As researchers, it is crucial that we honour that construct as more than just an absence of something and start viewing non-compassion as a construct that stands on its own in organizational research.

Recommendations for Organizational Practice

Based on this study, there are several recommendations that will be made for future practice in organizations. The first recommendation is that we need to have better discussions about what it means to lead in organizations. Leadership is more than a job—it is a stewardship, “an awesome responsibility for the lives entrusted to you ... [and an] accountability to something greater than oneself” (Chapman & Sisodia, 2015, p. 68). One need only read the narratives in this study to understand the impact, good and bad, that leaders have on others through simple,

everyday actions. Not everyone sees the benefit of truly putting people first in organizations, but this is short-sighted especially when addressing the complexity of problems that organizations face today. People spend much of their lives at work (a rough estimate is between 80,000 and 90,000 hours in a lifetime¹), and when the workplace becomes a stressor because of harmful leader behaviour rather than a place of growth and inspiration, the consequences spill over into work performance and home life. That distress follows people home to their families at the end of the day and stays with them the next day at work, and the cycle continues. As Chapman and Sisodia (2015) noted, “We’re destroying people and killing our culture because we send people home after treating them as objects and functions [in the workplace], instead of caring about them as human beings” (p. 67). The question becomes how to address this in organizations, which leads to the next recommendation.

The second recommendation is that leadership development programs in organizations must go further than simply teaching the usual leadership skills such as organizational efficiency and productivity; there must be discussions about what it means to lead with compassion at work. Trzeciak et al. (2023) emphasized, “Managers should recognize that compassion is not merely a ‘nice to have’ ... rather, it’s an evidence-based skill that is integral to leading effectively and holding teams together” (para. 20). By the same token, it is equally important to present stories that illustrate what can happen when leaders choose not to respond to suffering in a compassionate manner. There is still stigma associated with openly discussing emotions in the workplace, but the only way to dispel the myth of compassion as weak is to openly discuss and

¹ I arrived at this number by calculating my own work week over the course of my career as follows: 40-hour work week x 52 weeks x 40 years.

demonstrate what it means to be a compassionate leader. The importance of this is conveyed in a quote on caring leadership in the workplace by Bob Chapman, CEO of Barry-Wehmiller (as cited in Chapman & Sisodia, 2015): “This is how we can start to heal our brokenness: sending people home as better spouses, parents, children, friends, and citizens of their communities” (p. 91). As such, Worline and Dutton (2017b) noted that leaders can play an important role in fostering compassion in organizations by doing two things: creating space for the expression of suffering in the workplace; and creating felt presence by either sharing their own expression of suffering or holding space for those who are suffering. Frost (2003/2007) supported this by emphasizing that, as leaders, one way to show compassion is to “maintain a presence in the face of great suffering” (p. 200). As evidenced by the findings of this study, authentic and heartfelt actions like this by leaders can be a generative force for good in organizations.

The third recommendation is more of a brief discussion on authenticity within the context of compassion, as it may play an important role. What became clear from the analysis of the narratives demonstrating compassionate leader behaviours is that none involved grand gestures—every participant described a story of compassionate leader behaviour in response to mostly everyday challenges in the workplace. These leaders created space for recipients to be heard, or there was encouragement provided when there were stressful deadlines looming, or leaders actively listened as the recipient discussed concerns, or, as in several cases, there was support and comfort provided to recipients during a personal crisis or loss. Compassionate leader behaviours that demonstrated authenticity as described by participants included active listening, awareness of themselves and recipients, showing kindness and respect, being supportive, and willingness to take risks. As one of the participants noted when narrating their story of

compassionate leadership, “Those attributes of a really healthy organization [such as active listening, psychological safety, and trust] have their roots in those little actions, not in some grand strategy, but in behaviours like [my leader’s]” (W.S.). In an exploratory study of compassionate leader behaviour utilizing a phenomenological approach, Shuck et al. (2019) identified that one of the six recurring themes in describing compassion was authenticity. Specifically, participants noted leader behaviours such as showing vulnerability, openness in sharing experiences, and possessing self-awareness as demonstrating authenticity within the realm of leader compassion (Shuck et al., 2019), which supports Worline and Dutton’s (2017b) findings above. By the same token, Meechan et al. (2022) stated, “Authenticity is key, both for the individual leaders and for organizations” (p. 158). In other words, compassionate leader behaviour must be authentic since recipients will, no doubt, notice “if leaders’ and organizations’ actions and priorities are incongruent with their messages and espoused values” (Meechan et al., 2022, p. 158). Indeed, participants related stories where compassionate leader behaviour was aligned with their espoused values, and participants described feeling seen, heard, and understood by these leaders. In direct contrast, when leader behaviour was inauthentic, participants described feeling wounded, discounted, or isolated by their leaders. Therefore, leaders should consider how small, authentic actions that typically take only a few moments and cost nothing, can dramatically help to alleviate suffering in the workplace.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study that are worth mentioning. Only recipients of leader behaviours were interviewed, therefore, a more robust study design would be to interview leader-subordinate pairs about their perception of compassionate and non-compassionate leader

behaviours. In addition, participants were chosen from corporate workplaces across various industries. There exists considerable research in the education and healthcare industries on compassion, but there is a dearth of research in for-profit, publicly traded or privately held companies. While this narrow scope was purposely implemented, some may see this as a limitation.

All participants in this study were white, cisgender adults; therefore, no marginalized groups or people of colour were represented in this study. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling, which explains the narrow scope. A more robust study would cast a wider net in recruiting participants. Another limitation is that only leader-subordinate interactions were captured, and not peer to peer. This was by design since leaders behaving compassionately or non-compassionately to subordinates will be perceived differently by recipients than a peer-to-peer interaction, as there is a different power dynamic at play. Although this was intentional, some may see this as a limitation of this study.

Another limitation of this study is the potential for retrospective recall bias in the participant narratives. Retrospective recall bias is “said to occur when accuracy of recall regarding prior exposures is different for cases versus controls” (Raphael, 1987, p. 167). It is a well-documented phenomenon that can appear when utilizing a multitude of research approaches that rely on participants recalling past events. To be clear, recall bias is not equivalent to memory failure; instead, recall bias occurs when participants attach meaning to specific conditions surrounding an event as a way of explaining it, and this can potentially result in overreporting among cases or underreporting among controls (Raphael, 1987). Retrospective recall bias is discussed at great length in epidemiological studies in which there is a need to prove causality

between illness or disease and the circumstances surrounding the event; however, it is rarely mentioned in the narrative inquiry literature. Narrative inquiry is primarily focused on how a story is told, what the story means to the participant, and the emotions that the participant experiences in telling their story. According to Tagg (1985), retrospective recall bias is inherent in the recording of life stories. As such, it is likely that participant narratives in this study may not be fully accurate; however, accuracy is not the focus of narrative inquiry and neither would it be beneficial to fact-check the narratives shared, should that have been possible.

Lastly, a definition of compassion was embedded in the first interview question to participants in this study as opposed to asking participants how they defined compassion. In retrospect, it is possible that this may have influenced participants with respect to the types of stories they chose to share so that they better aligned with the provided definition. Although participants did not disclose that they were inadvertently influenced by this definition of compassion, the possibility that this occurred is nevertheless present in this study.

Conclusion

This study explored compassionate and non-compassionate leader behaviour in corporate workplaces from the recipients' perspective using narrative inquiry. The findings of compassionate leader behaviour were supported by existing literature in that the impact to recipients was positive and generative in nature. With respect to non-compassionate leader behaviour, the findings were overwhelmingly detrimental to recipients, and this was supported by literature in related areas, such as toxic workplaces, incivility in the workplace, and dysfunctional leaders. As noted above, there is a scarcity of research and academic literature that

explores suffering from the perspective of the sufferer, therefore, it was impossible to compare the findings of this study to other research of non-compassionate leader behaviour.

In all the compassionate leader narratives, the participants described how their leaders responded to their suffering with small, everyday actions that cost nothing of the leaders or the organizations other than a few minutes of being present. However, these small moments led to participants feeling seen and heard and, in the end, better able to continue with their work. In some cases, the benefits went well beyond the short term: these seemingly trivial actions changed people's lives. This is not an overstatement. One participant described a situation where their leader supported them through a stressful project by providing perspective on what really mattered. This 10-minute conversation changed that participant's way of leading teams for years after. They used this same approach with their direct reports when managing large projects and, as a consequence, one could say that hundreds of people benefitted from this single interaction. Although participants may have understood the direct impact of compassionate leader behaviour on positive perception of self, loyalty toward their leader, and the compounding effect of compassion, participants could not have recognized the profound, life-altering impact of small acts of compassion and authentic presence given by their leader.

I have seen and experienced first-hand the damage that can be created by a non-compassionate leader. It is not surprising that participants reported further suffering as a direct consequence of their leader's actions, from raw and visceral emotions to various mental and physical impact to disillusionment with their leaders and organizations. More than half of the participants left their organizations immediately or shortly after the incident. Many people might have stopped their story there, at simply describing grave acts of non-compassion; however, my

experiences led me to do deeper work in understanding compassion in the workplace such that you, the reader, may take these findings and acknowledge suffering in the workplace by helping leaders understand how they can do better.

Compassionate actions in the workplace might seem small and insignificant, or even unnecessary by some, but I maintain there are far-reaching consequences to our actions in the workplace as leaders that almost always spill over into our employee's lives as parents, partners, siblings, and friends. The inherent challenge with showing compassion in the workplace is that it requires considerable courage. Frost (1999) noted, "To act with compassion requires a degree of courage" (p. 129). We would like to believe that, given the opportunity, we would all respond with compassion to alleviate someone else's suffering, but the reality is that the entire compassion process is rife with uncertainty and risk, especially within organizations (Kanov et al., 2017). There is uncertainty in whether the sufferer will express suffering, and this is complicated by the uncertainty of the person who notices suffering in that they may not understand why there is suffering, which then can create uncertainty and fear about how and when to respond (Kanov et al., 2017). Indeed, it is not difficult to understand why noticing suffering and then responding to it compassionately is a courageous act. This was noted by Gilbert (2022) who indicated, "Crucial to compassion is therefore the *courage* to engage with suffering and risk, along with the *wisdom* of working out what to do" (p. 8). The following quote by Nadel (2022) eloquently speaks to the courage of showing compassion:

Compassion is neither soft nor naïve nor weak. Compassion requires a courage that toeing the party line does not. It involves standing up for our conscience even when our political allies don't. While it can use empathy and sympathy for guidance, it also needs a

rational basis: the ability to listen, understand, and to place oneself in the shoes of another. It requires the courage to look at the face of suffering, rather than turn away. It needs bravery to stand up against societal norms that praise greed, expect conflict, and demand simple answers. It also needs vulnerability: the capacity to acknowledge mistakes and to admit when we are wrong or ignorant. (p. 214)

To conclude, if we do not respond courageously with compassion toward those who are suffering in our workplaces, then nothing will change. Suffering will continue unnoticed, and we will continue to deny our humanity. We can no longer avert our gaze from suffering in the workplace. It is time to prioritize leading with care and compassion in corporate workplaces.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Opening

Researcher: “Thank you for being with me here today. As I mentioned before, my name is Maria Anderson, and this study is part of the requirement for a Doctor of Social Sciences degree at Royal Roads University in Victoria, BC, Canada. I am conducting research on how leaders behave when they encounter suffering in the workplace.”

Researcher: “I have provided you the informed consent and confidentiality form which you have signed. Do you have any questions about the study or about confidentiality before we continue?”

[Answer questions.]

Researcher: “For the purpose of this interview, I would like to record our conversation. May I record our conversation?”

[Await answer and turn on recording.]

Researcher: “Thank you. It is now recording.”

Researcher: “Would you like to start with a story of compassion or non-compassion?”

Questions for Story of Perceived Compassion

1. Compassion is defined as a four-step process that involves noticing that suffering is present, making meaning of the suffering, feeling empathic concern, and taking action to alleviate suffering. Can you tell me about a time when your leader demonstrated compassion toward you? Let’s start at the beginning and tell me what happened.
 - A. Can you describe your suffering? How did your leader become aware of your
 - B. How did your leader respond to your suffering? How do you know?
 - C. What were the impacts of this experience on you, your co-workers and the organization?
 - D. If you could go back in time to that event or experience, what do you wish had been different for you?
 - E. What, if anything, changed or shifted for you as a result of this experience?
2. Is there anything you would like to add?

Questions for Story of Perceived Non-compassion

1. Compassion is defined as a four-step process that involves noticing that suffering is present, making meaning of the suffering, feeling empathic concern, and taking action to alleviate suffering. Can you tell me about a time when your leader did not demonstrate compassion toward you? Let’s start at the beginning and tell me what happened.

- A. Can you describe your suffering? How did your leader become aware of your suffering? How do you know?
 - B. How did your leader respond to your suffering? How do you know?
 - C. If you could go back in time to that event or experience, what do you wish had been different for you?
 - D. What, if anything, changed or shifted for you as a result of this experience?
 - E. What were the impacts of this experience on you, your co-workers and the organization?
2. Is there anything you would like to add?

Closing

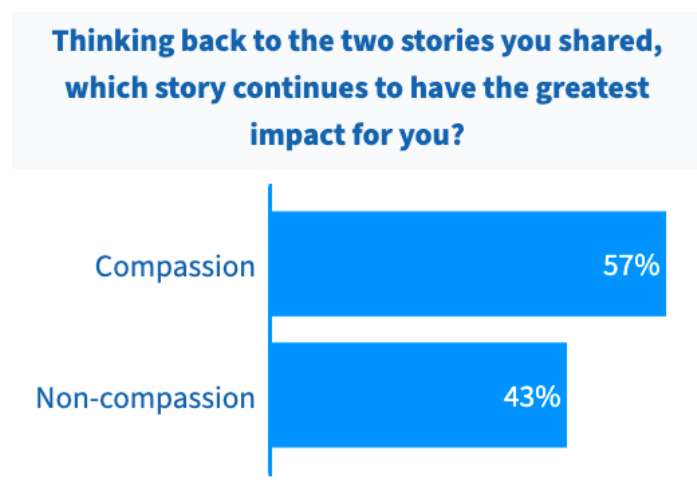
Researcher: “Thank you so much for your time. In the coming weeks, I will be in touch to schedule a time for the focus group where I will present aggregated findings from the interviews. In addition, I will email you a transcript of this interview for you to review. Your feedback on my interpretation of our interview will be greatly helpful.”

Appendix B: Focus Group Presentation

Slide 1: Please keep in mind ...

- What is shared here, stays here
- Respect the preference for others to remain anonymous
- Give others space to share their thoughts and actively listen
- Be kind!

Slide 2: Live Poll (N=7) – Are compassionate or non-compassionate leader actions more impactful?



Slide 3: Types of Stories Shared

- Loss of family member or co-worker
- Merger and/or acquisition
- Toxic culture
- Opportunity to grow/learn
- Parental leave
- Recovery from illness/surgery
- Business interruption
- Internal career move
- Relocation for family reasons
- Stressful project deadlines
- Failure of a product or service
- Not being heard/being dismissed
- Acknowledgement of hard work
- Laid off/terminated
- Support in a difficult work situation
- Personal boundaries not respected

Slide 4: Types of Compassionate Leader Behaviours

- Show respect, support, encouragement, kindness, humility
- Take risk; provide professional growth opportunities
- ‘We’ versus ‘me’ mindset
- Acknowledge and validate emotions
- Active listening
- Genuine concern for other’s well-being
- Acknowledge hard work
- Protect or shield team members
- Behave authentically (actions align with words)

Slide 5: Impact of Compassionate Leader Behaviour

- Loyalty to leader and organization
- Increased confidence, better perspective
- Feel valued and supported, opinion matters
- Work without fear
- Do not want to disappoint (“Would walk through a brick wall”)
- Would do anything for leader, often following them as they are promoted
- Model good leader behaviour that trickles down

Slide 6: Types of Non-compassionate Leader Behaviours

- Lead with fear (e.g., encourage punitive actions)
- Cross personal boundaries (e.g., cutting vacation or parental leave short)
- Expect team members to make moral compromises
- Verbal abuse (yelling, name-calling)
- Invalidate feelings (“gaslighting”)
- Self-serving (e.g., sacrifice others to protect themselves)
- Look for someone to blame for product/service failure
- Ignore or isolate team members who do not share their opinion

Slide 7: Impact of Non-compassionate Leader Behaviour

- Increased self-doubt, loss of confidence and self-esteem
- Work in fear; no psychological safety
- Immediate loss of loyalty for the leader and organization, especially if not addressed
- Thoughts of leaving the leader and/or organization are entertained, and sometimes acted on
- Somatic issues – not eating or sleeping properly
- Impact on family generates stronger feelings of disillusionment
- Think about the incident/event years later

Slide 8: Live Poll (N=27) – What is non-compassion?

- Sometimes described as indifference, being unkind or insensitive
- Not just the absence of compassion
- Wounding; feels like “something gets ripped away”
- Meaning is lost

What words would you use to define leader non-compassion?



Slide 9: Knowledge Mobilization

- Focus group
- Published dissertation
- Academic papers and conferences
- Corporate workshops and executive coaching

Appendix C: Recruitment Email for Potential Research Participants

Dear [potential participant name],

I would like to invite you to participate in a research project I am conducting. This study is part of the requirement for a Doctor of Social Sciences degree at Royal Roads University in Victoria, BC, Canada. I am conducting research on the impact of compassionate and non-compassionate behaviours by leaders in corporate workplace settings.

My criteria for research participation are as follows:

- You have two stories that you would be willing to share with me of compassion and non-compassion demonstrated by your leader(s) where you were the recipient, and
- At the time these stories took place, you would have worked for a publicly traded or privately held, for-profit mid- to large-sized organization.

Participants in my study will be involved in a one to two hour interview. In addition, you will be invited to participate in a focus group to hear the preliminary aggregated findings of my research and engage in dialogue with other participants about the findings. May I enlist your assistance and participation?

I greatly appreciate your consideration of my request. If you meet the criteria for participation and are interested, please email me your contact information so that we may discuss your involvement further.

In the meantime, feel free to contact me should you have any questions or comments.

With gratitude,
Maria Anderson

Appendix D: Informed Consent and Information Letter

Dear [participant],

My name is Maria Anderson, and I would like to invite you to participate in a research project I am conducting. This study is part of the requirement for my Doctor of Social Sciences degree at Royal Roads University. To confirm that I am a student at Royal Roads University you may contact Dr. Mary Bernard, Program Head, Doctor of Social Sciences in the College of Interdisciplinary Studies at [email address] or [phone number]. You may also contact my Academic Supervisor, Dr. Catherine Etmanski, at [email address] or [phone number].

Purpose of the study

The purpose of my research is to explore the impact on recipients of perceived compassionate and non-compassionate behaviours by leaders in corporate workplace settings.

Your participation and how information will be collected

The study will consist of open-ended interviews and a focus group. The interview is anticipated to last between one to two hours, and it will be recorded via Zoom. A professional transcriptionist, who has signed a confidentiality agreement, will transcribe the audio file and you will have the opportunity to review the transcript. The anticipated questions include me asking you about a time when you experienced compassion and the absence of compassion in the workplace by your leader and how this may have impacted you.

All interview participants will be invited to take part in the focus group, which will be hosted and recorded via Zoom. The focus group is anticipated to last approximately 2 hours to 2.5 hours. A professional transcriptionist, who has signed a confidentiality agreement, will transcribe the audio file. The anticipated format of the focus group is that I will share aggregated themes from the interviews and will then ask participants to comment or add to these preliminary findings. In addition, the focus group will allow participants to collectively co-create new meaning around the concepts of compassion and non-compassion in the workplace.

The data collected from interviews and the focus group will be used to identify themes and contribute to recommendations in conducting my dissertation research.

Benefits and risks to participation

My results should provide new insight on the impact of compassionate and non-compassionate behaviour by leaders in corporate workplace settings. This research will also inform ways in which leaders and organizations can foster compassion in the workplace.

Re-visiting non-compassionate situations may bring up emotions. I will provide a list of follow-up support resources which will be shared with all research participants.

Real or Perceived Conflict of Interest

I have no real, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest in conducting this research. I disclose this information here so that you can make a fully informed decision on whether to participate in this study.

Confidentiality, security of data, and retention period

I will work to protect your privacy throughout this study. All information I collect will be maintained in confidence with hard copies stored in a locked cabinet. Electronic data (such as transcripts or audio files) will be stored on a password-protected or encrypted external hard drive, which will be locked in a cabinet when not in use. Information will be recorded in hand-written format and audio taped, and, where appropriate, summarized in anonymous format. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual unless specific agreement has been obtained beforehand. Due to the nature of the focus group, people will see who else is participating; therefore, anonymity and confidentiality in the focus group cannot be guaranteed, though I will request that everyone respect the confidential nature of the study.

Sharing results

I will be sharing my findings with my Academic Supervisor and Committee at Royal Roads University.

I will also share results with you in the following ways:

- The focus group will provide an opportunity to review the initial themes that emerge from the individual interviews.
- Following the focus group, I will share a draft of my findings, conclusions, and recommendations for your review and feedback.
- Ultimately, my final dissertation will be published in the following repositories:
 - ProQuest
 - Library and Archives Canada
 - VIURRSpace, RRU's online institutional repository.
- I will also share a PDF copy of my final dissertation with each of the participants.

It is possible that I will also be sharing my research findings through scholarly publication of journal articles, books, and conference presentations.

Procedure for withdrawing from the study

Individual interview participants who wish to withdraw from the study, are asked to send an email to [email address] to indicate their desire to withdraw or communicate that request during the interview. All data collected will be stored separately and will be destroyed following the data retention period.

For participants in the focus group, it will not be possible to remove specific individual comments because the data are being collected as part of one digital audio file. However, no comments will be attributed to any individual who participates in the focus group.

I look forward to your participation in this research project. Feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes. Please keep a copy of this information letter for your records.

Thank you!

Name: Maria Anderson
Email: [email address]
Telephone: [phone number]

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP

As part of your participation in this study you are asked to sign the following consent form. By signing this form, you agree that you are over the age of 19 and have read the information letter for this study. Your signature states that you are giving your voluntary and informed consent to participate in this project. Specifically:

- I consent to the audio recording of this narrative interview
- I consent to reviewing the narrative interview for the purposes of providing input or clarification on the material captured by the researcher
- I consent to being contacted with follow-up questions, or clarification
- I commit to respecting the confidential nature of the focus group by not sharing identifying information, or specific comments shared during the focus group by or about the other participants
- I consent to being audio recorded during my participation in the focus group. I understand that due to the group nature of this study, the audio recording will be ongoing throughout the interview and focus group, and my voice or image cannot easily be removed.

Name (please print) _____

Signature* _____

Date (yyyy/mm/dd) _____

* Consent received via email will also be accepted.