

Compassionate Leadership

Leading with Heart

COMPASSION

SINCERITY

SENSITIVITY

HONESTY

LEADERSHIP
QUALITIES

DETERMINATION

HUMILITY

COURAGE

INITIATIVITY

CONFIDENCE

About the Roadmap Series:

Supported by the Office of Family Assistance's Peer Technical Assistance (PeerTA), the Roadmap Series highlights responsive leadership and management practices to support the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agencies and their partners in adapting to new ways of work and connection amid the pandemic.



The Challenge

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program leadership are guiding their staff through an unprecedented, rapidly changing time. These circumstances may increase the likelihood staff are facing secondary traumatic stress, or compassion fatigue.

The Insight

By leading with compassion, program leadership can strengthen the ability of teams to thrive amid complex change. This begins with three fundamentals: listening, trusting, and encouraging staff.

You are leading in unprecedented times. Clients and their families are experiencing uncertainty, fear, and grief in new and complex ways; so are your staff. The intense and rapidly changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic may increase the likelihood that staff are grappling with secondary traumatic stress, or compassion fatigue.

These conditions are a natural, emotional toll that can result from working with clients who have experienced trauma; however, they can be mitigated through proactive strategies at the individual and organizational level.¹

Individuals in the workplace are constantly influenced by the emotions and moods of those around them.² Now, more than ever, it is essential for managers and senior leadership to emotionally connect with their staff, show care and concern, and encourage them to take care of

themselves in addition to their clients.

By honing your capacity for compassionate leadership now, studies show that you may improve your staff's job satisfaction, commitment towards your organization, and likelihood of expressing compassion towards one another.³ One of the leading voices in the field of compassionate leadership is the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute (SIYLI), which teaches mindfulness and emotional intelligence as foundations of effective leadership and collaboration.⁴ Similarly, researchers at Roffey Park Institute developed a "Compassion in the Workplace" model to measure an individual's self-assessed level of compassion at work.⁵

In the process of developing this model, they identified key attributes of compassionate leaders, which guide the following three fundamentals of leading with compassion.



Listen.

Being sensitive to the well-being of others means noticing when they might need help. Particularly in environments where staff are busy and working remotely, it limits your ability to read nonverbal cues; this might require setting aside time for intentional and regular inquiries into your staff's mental and physical well-being.

Rather than trying to solve a problem, these conversations should be centered around expressing empathy and encouraging staff to reflect on what they might need. Like most things, listening is a skill that can be honed.

Here are some simple tips for actively hearing and thoughtfully responding:⁶ How did staff formerly engage in informal conversations at the office and are there virtual ways to mimic these activities (e.g., chatting about their families, eating lunch together, sharing stories of client successes, etc.)?



Use non-verbal cues to show that you are listening and paying careful attention: Maintain eye contact, do not fidget, and keep arms uncrossed if you are using video conferencing. On the phone, allow for pauses and appropriate silences to give the speaker time to proceed at their own pace.



Demonstrate that you are following the conversation with brief acknowledgement responses.

Use one- to three-word statements or nonverbal gestures, like nodding and saying, "Uh-huh," "Sure," and "Right."



Paraphrase and reflect the thoughts and feelings conveyed by the speaker to confirm your understanding. Clarify and make the speaker feel heard.

Say, "It sounds like what you are saying is... Is that right?" and "It seems like you are feeling... Is that right?"



Make the most of regular check-in meetings with staff:

- 📍 Begin each meeting by asking staff how they are doing as people, not just employees. How are they continuing to adjust to telework? How are their families doing? Are they feeling overwhelmed?
- 📍 Ask staff to share their tentative schedules for the week and their communication preferences while they work remotely. Do not forget to share your own.
- 📍 Read the room. If someone is less engaged, take note and check in personally with them one-on-one following the meeting.



Trust.

Your staff are now likely working in a variety of configurations. For some leaders, this may bring up concerns around how to monitor staff's performance in the absence of paper documentation and informal physical oversight. Even in difficult times, a compassionate person accepts and validates another person's experience in an effort to understand their situation. While schedules might look different as staff juggle caretaking and personal responsibilities at home,

trust that your staff are doing the best they can. Rather than penalizing them for conditions that are outside of their control, offer staff the flexibility to determine what works for their schedule and keeps themselves and their families healthy. Communicating this trust to your staff will validate their hard work and may increase the likelihood that they will be more open about the challenges they face.⁷

Washington State Department of Health and Social Services has temporarily suspended holding staff to internal production targets and audit standards to lend flexibility as they cope with stress related to COVID-19. At the Department of Human Services in Colorado, Colorado Works Program, managers and supervisors are encouraged to be understanding of staff who might need to take a mental health day or work non-traditional hours to care for their children.



Encourage.

In addition to practicing compassion in one-on-one interactions with colleagues, compassionate leaders foster a culture of compassion and caring in their wider organizations. As staff stretch to meet the changing needs of their clients, evidence shows that practicing professional and emotional self-care may be correlated with less burnout and increased compassion satisfaction.⁸

Emphasize that self-care is a critical piece of your team's job and is "necessary for [their] effectiveness and success in honoring [their] professional and personal commitments."⁹ One way to emphasize that self-care is valued at your organization is by modeling compassion

towards yourself with self-care. Share what you did to relax over the past week. If staff organize virtual social gatherings, plan to attend. If you are having a hard day, you can share that with your staff. By sharing your own challenges, you signal that it is appropriate to talk about personal difficulties in the workplace.

Change gives us the opportunities to reflect on our roles as leaders. This might be outside of your comfort zone, and that is okay. You are adapting to a new way of leading. By honing your capacity for compassionate leadership now, you are investing in the well-being and effectiveness of yourself and your team in the long run.

Leadership at Reach Up, Vermont's TANF program, have been connecting staff to mindfulness and meditation resources and their Employee Assistance Program (EAP). At DC Department of Human Services, the human resources department has rolled out a series of daily wellness trainings and webinars, including yoga and meditation.

Where Can I Find More Information?

For more tips on meeting the needs of your unique team, see "Building Social Cohesion Among Virtual Teams." For more information on staying connected both externally and internally, see "Physically Distant, but Socially Connected: Understanding Different Modes of Connection."

For more examples from TANF programs around the country, see the following Office of Family Assistance webinars:

TANF and the Transition to the Virtual Workforce and A Necessary Pivot: Virtual Case Management and Coaching Amid COVID-19.

The Harvard Business Review produced the following free e-book which includes several pieces on leading through the COVID-19 crisis, managing remote teams, and communicating effectively with staff: [**Coronavirus and Business: The Insights You Need from Harvard Business Review.**](#)



Learn More About PeerTA

The PeerTA provides evidence-informed, direct, and timely technical assistance to state, tribal, county, and territory TANF programs and their partners. PeerTA also facilitates the sharing of timely and practical information on innovative practices, emerging challenges and opportunities, and application of lessons learned to the broader TANF field.

To learn more about the PeerTA network and the resources, publications, and tools it makes available, please visit: <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/>

To make a request for technical assistance, please visit: <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/technical-assistance>

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Endnotes

1 For more information on secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue, see the following concept paper on [Secondary Traumatic Stress](#) and broader [Resource Guide to Trauma-Informed Services](#) (2017) produced by the Administration for Children and Families, SAMHSA, Administration for Community Living, Offices of the Assistant Secretary for Health, and the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at HHS.

2 Barsade, S.G. (2002). [The Ripple Effect: Emotional Contagion and its Influence on Group Behavior](#). *Administrative Science Quarterly* 47(4).

3 Lilius, J.M., Kanov, J., Dutton, J., Worline, M.C. & Maitlis, S. (2011). [Compassion revealed: What we know about compassion at work \(and where we need to know more\)](#). In G. M. Spreitzer & K.S. Cameron (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*.

4 [Search Inside Yourself](#). (2020). Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute.

5 Poorkavoos, M. (2016). [Compassionate Leadership: What Is It and Why Do Organizations Need More of It](#). Roffey Park.

6 For more information on active listening and reflective response strategies, see [MIT Sloan Communication Program Teaching Note](#) (2010) by Joann Yates, Sloan Distinguished Professor of Management.

7 For additional recommendations on managing and communicating with remote staff, see [15 Questions About Remote Work, Answered](#) (2020) from the Harvard Business Review.

8 Bloomquist, K. R., Wood, L., Friedmeyer-Trainor, K., & Kim, H. (2015). [Self-care and Professional Quality of Life: Predictive Factors Among MSW Practitioners](#). *Advances in Social Work* 16(2).

9 For more information on self-care, see the University of Buffalo School of Social Work's [Introduction to Self-Care](#). For self-care tips for helpers developed by Francoise Mathieu, M. Ed., CCC., Compassion Fatigue Specialist, and disseminated by the National Council for Behavioral Health, see [Top 12 Self-Care Tips for Helpers](#).