Mutual respect will bring mutual rewards

Compassionate leadership and collaborative working create benefits for staff, organisations and patients.

The recent report of a director of nursing removed from the Nursing and Midwifery Council register for bullying, aggressive and intimidating behaviour is shocking. Such actions are the opposite of everything I expect in a leader, and are in sharp contrast to the current focus on compassionate leadership and its virtues.

People are at the heart of healthcare, so it makes sense that those in leadership roles should take account of the needs and interests of staff. However, the discussion on compassionate leadership sometimes implies this is a new approach, when in fact there have always been good leaders who have shown compassion.

On my first ward placement four decades ago, the ward sister showed concern for everyone: patients and staff, both senior and junior.

**Collaboration and inclusion**

As society changes so leadership styles adapt to meet new norms. Today that can mean less hierarchy, command and control, and an expectation that leaders will be collaborative and inclusive in their relationships at work. Perhaps this is what has led to the current emphasis on compassionate leadership.

There is a range of characteristics of effective, compassionate leadership. Listening to and acknowledging staff, and enabling them to find their voice, are key to establishing good relationships and having mutual respect; this extends to patients and the public as well.

To be compassionate towards others, a leader needs to kind to themselves too. People should feel included and that the leader wants to help them; this assists staff to do their jobs.

**Humanity and vulnerability**

Healthcare is a shared endeavour and if a leader can take people with them then it becomes a mutually beneficial relationship, where people complement each other to drive performance and innovation. In my experience this all starts with the leader’s daily behaviour.

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Acknowledging people, listening and showing empathy and concern all contribute to effective leadership. Leaders can also reveal their humanity, and sometimes their vulnerability.

The compassionate leader still sets a direction, makes decisions, is brave, firm and fair, and exercises accountability. Compassionate leadership gets the best from people.

A leader who invests in relationships and understands problems from another’s viewpoint does not create anarchy. Rather, they set a climate or culture wherein excellent patient care – and staff – can flourish.

More reading on compassion

- Role of nursing leadership in providing compassionate care
  rcni.com/compassion-leadership

- Five myths of compassionate leadership (King’s Fund)
  tinyurl.com/compassion-myth

- How compassion and kindness can change a community
  rcni.com/compassion-community

- Driving improvement through compassionate leadership and staff engagement (NHS Improvement)
  tinyurl.com/improvement-compassion