Understanding Suffering

By Dr Mark Crosweller AFSM

Leaders carry a profound moral responsibility: to shield others from unnecessary suffering and to ensure their decisions—especially those made on behalf of people not directly at the decision-making table—do not deepen harm. Yet suffering is often poorly understood, even by leaders who must navigate it daily. A central insight arising from research with disaster management leaders is that many acknowledge they do not understand suffering well, even as they make decisions that profoundly shape the lived experience of those enduring it. This gap between intention and understanding opens a critical question: how can leaders meaningfully reduce the suffering of others if they have not explored its nature within themselves? Understanding suffering is foundational to relationality—to the capacity to connect with, lead, and protect others in ways that honour their humanity. When leaders deepen their understanding of their own suffering, they open a doorway to recognising the suffering of those they serve, thereby grounding leadership in compassion, humility, and ethical clarity.

Western and Eastern philosophical traditions offer rich insights into the nature of suffering. Across these perspectives lies a shared recognition that suffering is intrinsic to human existence. To suffer is, etymologically, "to bear" or "to endure"—a universal human experience linked to our vulnerability, desires, values, and fears.

Aristotle: Virtue, Pleasure, and Pain

Aristotle locates suffering at the centre of moral development. Virtue is cultivated through habituation—through repeatedly choosing moderation and acting well despite discomfort. Pain (suffering) and pleasure (happiness) form the terrain on which morality is built: we act wrongly through the lure of pleasure, and we fail morally through our aversion to pain. Courage, therefore, is the willingness to endure suffering for the sake of what is right. Those who can endure pain virtuously achieve eudaimonia—human flourishing.

Enlightenment Thinkers: The Universality of Suffering

Philosophers such as Bentham, Rousseau, and Schopenhauer extend this view by highlighting the universality of sufferability—the capacity of all sentient beings to suffer. Bentham argues that ethical action seeks the greatest happiness and least suffering for the greatest number. Rousseau contends that true happiness arises from equilibrium between our desires and our moral, mental, and physical capacities.

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Schopenhauer adds that suffering intensifies when we resist reality—when our will refuses to accept the inevitability of adversity, impermanence, or loss.
Across these traditions, suffering emerges as both unavoidable and ethically instructive. It teaches us about our attachments and illuminates the moral stakes of our choices.

Daoism

Daoism encourages a natural acceptance of suffering, teaching that liberation arises from non-attachment and non-action (wu wei). Suffering grows when we cling to impermanent things or attempt to control forces beyond our influence. By recognising the complementary nature of opposites—hard and easy, long and short, gain and loss—we free ourselves from the grasping that creates inner turmoil.

Confucianism

Confucianism frames suffering as part of destiny yet emphasises that moral character enables us to address its causes. Pain and hardship, far from diminishing us, play a role in cultivating greatness. It is futile to dwell excessively on what we cannot control; moral effort must focus on virtuous conduct within relational and social contexts.

Buddhism

Buddhism offers one of the most comprehensive analyses of suffering. At its core lies the belief that suffering originates from self-grasping and self-cherishing—the mistaken view that the self is permanent, separate, inherently existent, and more important than others. This illusion generates the "three poisons" of attachment, aversion, and ignorance, which form the root causes of human suffering (Dukkha). Freedom arises when one recognises the impermanence of all phenomena and cultivates compassion and wisdom.

How We Experience Suffering

Loss of Sense of Self - According to Eric Cassell, suffering occurs when the integrity of the self is threatened. This includes experiences where one feels fractured, incomplete, or in need of healing. Suffering, therefore, extends beyond physical pain into existential disruption.
Loss of Engagement or Meaning - Suffering can arise from disconnection—losing a sense of purpose, belonging, or alignment with one's values. Theologian Henri Nouwen describes suffering as deeply personal and often incommunicable; we may believe others cannot understand our pain. This sense of isolation intensifies suffering.
Injustice and Social Suffering - Social suffering results from material deprivation, inequality, and the abuse of power. It produces emotional, psychological, and existential harm. Those with less power often bear suffering more intensely, focusing their energies on survival rather than flourishing. Yet when such suffering is acknowledged, dignity is restored; when ignored, it deepens harm.
Suffering as Illness - Framing suffering purely as illness can be reductionist, leading to feelings of shame or inadequacy when one does not "heal." This medicalised lens risks objectifying the sufferer and obscuring the relational, contextual nature of suffering. True care requires suspending judgement and honouring the dignity inherent in another's experience.
Suffering and Virtue - Some thinkers emphasise that suffering can cultivate virtues such as compassion,

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courage, justice, and strength. Michael Brady argues that we suffer because we care deeply about others, our identities, and the world. Threats to these values can inspire virtuous action and motivate us to alleviate suffering—our own and others'.

Finding Meaning Through Suffering - Viktor Frankl's insights from his imprisonment in concentration camps demonstrate that meaning-making can transform suffering. Even when freedom is taken away, one retains the ability to choose a response. Suffering, in Frankl's view, is made meaningful by the attitude we adopt toward it and the purpose we pursue through it.

Universal and Shared Suffering

While suffering is personal and unique in expression, Buddhism's concept of Dukkha underscores its universal nature. All human beings experience:

- illness, ageing, and death
- sorrow, grief, and loss
- unfulfilled desires
- exposure to unpleasant circumstances
- the instability of all things we cling to

This universality forms the basis of relationality. Even if we have not experienced another's precise circumstances, we have all experienced loss, pain, fear, disappointment, or longing. These shared human experiences allow us to relate with empathy—not perfectly, but meaningfully.

This recognition counters the common assertion that "no one can understand my suffering." While each person's suffering is unique, it is not incomprehensible. It is through acknowledging our own suffering that we become capable of appreciating the suffering of others.

What Happens When We Do Not Understand Suffering

When leaders fail to understand suffering—whether through denial, privilege, emotional distance, or bureaucratic pressures—otherwise avoidable suffering proliferates.

Research shows that many leaders either:

- denied their own suffering to avoid emotional vulnerability
- misunderstood resilience as the suppression of suffering
- prioritised operational or political objectives over human needs
- failed to recognise the suffering of those they served
- lacked authenticity or emotional intelligence
- were insulated by privilege from the lived reality of suffering

When suffering is ignored or minimised, leadership decisions—often well-intended—can exacerbate harm, erode trust, and widen the distance between institutions and communities. Conversely, when leaders consciously recognise suffering, they become more capable of compassionate and effective action.

The Responsibility of Leadership

The challenge for leaders is to consciously turn toward their own suffering and deepen their understanding of it. By doing so, they enhance their capacity to relate authentically to others, reduce unnecessary suffering, and cultivate compassion.

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Using frameworks such as the First Noble Truth from Buddhism can assist leaders in examining their suffering without avoidance or denial. When leaders recognise that suffering is a universal human experience—not unique to individuals but shared across humanity—they strengthen relationality and create pathways for compassionate action.

Ultimately, leadership grounded in the understanding of suffering becomes leadership rooted in humanity. Only through acknowledging suffering—our own and others'—can leaders hope to reduce harm and act with wisdom, humility, and moral purpose.

Five Lessons for Leaders

1. *Leaders Must Understand Their Own Suffering to Ethically Lead Others.* Many leaders do not fully understand their own suffering, yet they make decisions that profoundly shape the suffering of others. This insight is foundational: leaders who disconnect from their own experiences of fear, pain, loss, or vulnerability also disconnect from the humanity of those they serve. Understanding our own suffering increases ethical clarity, authenticity, and relational trust—core ingredients of compassionate leadership.
1. *Suffering Is Universal—This Awareness Deepens Relational Leadership.* Across Aristotelian, Enlightenment, Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist traditions, suffering is understood as a universal human experience. Leaders who recognise this universality strengthen their ability to empathise, not through sentimentality, but through shared humanity. This recognition allows leaders to relate meaningfully even when they have not lived the same experiences as others, replacing judgment with empathy and reducing emotional distance.
1. *Ignoring Suffering—One's Own or Others'—Creates Avoidable Harm*. There are several ways leaders unintentionally intensify suffering. They deny their own vulnerability, equate resilience with emotional suppression, prioritise systems and politics over people, and fail to see or acknowledge the suffering of the communities they serve. When suffering is unrecognised, leadership decisions—even well-intentioned ones—can cause deeper harm. Awareness, presence, and emotional engagement are therefore not optional; they are moral responsibilities.
1. *Philosophical Traditions Offer Leaders Distinct Lenses for Meaning and Action.* Aristotle teaches that moral strength grows through endurance of discomfort. Schopenhauer warns that resistance to reality intensifies suffering. Daoism points to non-attachment and naturalness. Confucianism emphasises moral effort within destiny. Buddhism identifies self-grasping as the root of suffering. These traditions offer leaders practical insights for navigating adversity with humility, acceptance, and ethical intention. Engaging with these lenses helps leaders cultivate wisdom rather than react from fear or ego.
1. *Leadership Requires Standing With Suffering—Not Pathologising, Minimising, or Avoiding It.* Suffering appears not only as physical pain but as loss of identity, loss of meaning, social injustice, existential fragmentation, and moral injury. A leader's role is not to rush to fix or medicalise suffering, but to recognise it fully and respond with dignity, presence, and courage. By acknowledging suffering openly—rather than avoiding or sanitising it—leaders restore humanity, strengthen relational bonds, and create conditions for healing and trust.

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