Beyond Productivity and Why Compassion Matters

By Dr Mark Crosweller AFSM

I recently sat down to have lunch with a wonderful colleague and friend who is a senior official of an Australian government department. A very responsible job with immense pressure to deliver. As the conversation unfolded we talked about the importance of ethics in leadership, especially ethics such as compassion. We agreed that compassion is important, but then they commented and said, "of course this government is highly focussed on delivery" as if to suggest that there was a binary choice between being compassionate and delivering on an agenda.

I found the comment amusing for several reasons, not the least of which because it is not the first time I have heard this binary distinction about compassion and say, for example, productivity, efficiency, effectiveness or delivery. To suggest that we can only have one or the other is to suggest that the latter have higher moral worth than compassion.

However, as a government minister once said to me when researching for my PhD some years ago, "I think (trust in government) is decreasing because people's fundamental needs are not being met. And if governments don't exist so that you can achieve your needs, safety, security, economic opportunity, personal fulfilment, a good life, a happy life, then what is government there for?" Great question!

We only reward what we can measure

In a world increasingly organised around metrics, deadlines, optimisation, and measurable outcomes, compassion is often treated as secondary to productivity, efficiency, effectiveness, and delivery. These latter qualities are rewarded because they are visible. They can be quantified, audited, benchmarked, and reported upward through institutions. Productivity produces outputs. Efficiency reduces waste. Effectiveness achieves objectives. Delivery demonstrates completion. Modern systems are built to value what can be measured.

Yet beneath these necessary organisational functions lies a deeper question: what is the purpose of human activity in the first place?

A society may become extraordinarily productive while simultaneously becoming emotionally impoverished. An organisation may achieve every strategic target while quietly exhausting the humanity of the people within it. A leader may deliver outcomes while leaving fear, humiliation, burnout, or alienation in their wake. In such circumstances, success becomes strangely hollow. The machine works, but the human spirit diminishes.

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Why compassion matters

Compassion matters because it speaks to the moral quality of existence rather than merely its operational performance.

This distinction is critical. Productivity concerns what we produce. Efficiency concerns how quickly or economically we produce it. Effectiveness concerns whether we achieve intended outcomes. Delivery concerns execution. But compassion concerns how consciousness encounters other consciousness. It governs the ethical texture of relationship itself.

From the perspective that runs quietly beneath much of my work — that consciousness is meaningful, relational, and morally formative — compassion becomes not a sentimental accessory to leadership or human life, but its organising principle.

If consciousness continues beyond physical existence (the subject of my forthcoming book), then human beings are not disposable instruments within systems. They are not merely resources to optimise. They are centres of experience carrying grief, hope, fear, love, memory, and moral consequence. Productivity may shape economies, but compassion shapes souls.

This becomes particularly visible in moments of suffering. In disasters, emergencies, illness, grief, and trauma, people rarely remember whether a process was administratively elegant. They remember whether they were treated with dignity. They remember whether someone listened. Whether someone stayed. Whether another human being recognised their pain without reducing them to a task to be processed.

Compassion restores personhood where systems tend to reduce people to functions.

Setting direction

This is not an argument against competence. Compassion without capability can become ineffective sentimentality. In emergency management, leadership, medicine, education, or governance, delivery matters profoundly because lives depend upon it. But compassion determines the moral direction in which competence is exercised. It ensures that efficiency does not become cruelty disguised as professionalism.

History repeatedly shows that highly efficient systems are not necessarily humane systems. Some of the most devastating human failures in history were marked not by inefficiency, but by efficient indifference. Bureaucracies can process suffering with terrifying competence when compassion is removed from the equation. Human beings become numbers, categories, risks, liabilities, or obstacles. The Australian experience of the "Robodebt"[1] scheme is a classic example. The language changes first. Then the moral imagination narrows. Eventually, people cease to be encountered as sacred.

Compassion interrupts this collapse.

It forces us to see the other not as a means to an end, but as intrinsically valuable. It insists that the emotional and moral consequences of our actions matter as much as the measurable outcomes. It slows the impulse to instrumentalise human beings for institutional gain.

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1. The Australian "Robodebt" scheme was a controversial automated debt recovery program run by the Australian Government between 2015 and 2019 that unlawfully pursued hundreds of thousands of welfare recipients for alleged debts. It became one of the most significant public administration failures in modern Australian history.

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Mistaken appearances

This is why compassion often appears inefficient from the perspective of systems. Listening takes time. Presence takes time. Patience takes time. Forgiveness takes time. Ethical reflection takes time. To sit with grief without rushing toward resolution is inefficient. To care for a struggling colleague beyond contractual obligation is inefficient. To prioritise the wellbeing of exhausted staff over immediate numerical outputs may appear inefficient in the short term.

And yet compassion frequently produces the deepest and most enduring forms of effectiveness.

People who feel psychologically safe become more creative, more resilient, and more loyal. Communities treated with dignity recover more fully from disasters. Organisations grounded in trust adapt better under stress. Leaders who embody compassion create cultures where courage and honesty become possible because people no longer operate primarily from fear.

Shaping who we become

More importantly, compassion shapes who we become.

This matters enormously. If the universe possesses a moral dimension (also the subject of my forthcoming book) — if consciousness is not merely computational but ethically formative — then compassion is not simply socially useful behaviour. It becomes participation in the deepest structure of reality itself.

Many of the people I interviewed for my forthcoming book reflected upon the emotional consequences of their actions upon others. Again and again, what appears to matter is not status, productivity, wealth, or institutional success, but love, kindness, cruelty, neglect, generosity, and presence. The moral weight of existence seems to gather not around achievement, but around relationship.

This radically reorders human priorities.

A person may build a vast career and yet fail to love well. Another may leave little measurable legacy but profoundly alter the lives of others through compassion. Modern culture tends to celebrate the former because outcomes are publicly visible. But human beings, at the end of life, often discover that meaning resided more deeply in the latter.

Compassion also matters because suffering is universal. Productivity belongs primarily to seasons of strength, health, and stability. Compassion remains meaningful even in weakness, dying, failure, grief, or decline. A person confined to a hospital bed may produce nothing economically valuable and yet become a profound source of wisdom, reconciliation, tenderness, or love. If human worth depends solely upon productivity, then vulnerability becomes a kind of social diminishment. But compassion recognises dignity independent of utility.

This may be one of the great spiritual and ethical challenges of modernity: remembering that human beings possess value beyond what they can deliver.

The language of productivity can quietly colonise identity itself. People begin to experience guilt for resting, shame for suffering, or worthlessness when they cannot perform. They internalise the belief that value must constantly be earned through output. Compassion resists this reduction. It reminds us that being precedes doing.

Compassion as strength

Even in leadership, compassion is often misunderstood as softness. In reality, genuine compassion frequently require s enormous courage. It means remaining emotionally open in environments that reward detachment. It

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means seeing complexity without retreating into cynicism. It means holding accountability and mercy together simultaneously. Compassionate leaders still make difficult decisions, but they refuse to dehumanise those affected by them.

In this sense, compassion is not the opposite of strength. It may be its highest expression.

Ultimately, productivity, efficiency, effectiveness, and delivery are instrumental goods. They are valuable because they help accomplish something else. Compassion, however, is intrinsic. It is valuable in and of itself because it honours the reality of conscious experience.

A productive society without compassion may become materially successful but spiritually barren. A compassionate society may still value excellence and delivery, but it remembers why these things matter in the first place: because human beings matter.

And perhaps this is the deeper truth: that when everything else falls away — achievement, status, performance, identity — what remains morally significant is how we encountered one another along the way.

Five Questions for leaders

1. In pursuing productivity, efficiency, effectiveness, and delivery, have I unintentionally begun to treat people as functions, outputs, or risks rather than as human beings carrying grief, hope, fear, dignity, and moral consequence?
2. When those I lead experience suffering, exhaustion, failure, or vulnerability, what will they remember most about my leadership: the outcomes I delivered, or the way I treated them in moments when they most needed compassion and presence?
3. Have the systems, language, and performance measures within my organisation narrowed my moral imagination in ways that make efficiency appear more important than humanity?
4. Am I creating a culture where people feel psychologically safe enough to speak honestly, show vulnerability, rest when needed, and act courageously without fear of humiliation or dehumanisation?
5. If leadership ultimately shapes not only what organisations achieve but who people become, then what kind of human being is my leadership helping others become — and what kind of person is it making me?

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