

LEADING (AND LEARNING) WITH COMPASSION: A LEADERSHIP MODEL FOR TURBULENT TIMES

Dawn M. Shinew, & Jennifer Waldron

College of Education and Human Development, Bowling Green State University (USA)

Abstract

Across the globe, higher education is in a prolonged period of turbulence marked by demographic contraction, fiscal constraint, policy intervention, technological transformation, protest and unrest, and shifting student aspirations and expectations; there is no end in sight to the turmoil. Conventional managerial approaches emphasizing efficiency and compliance often neglect the ethical, emotional, and learning dimensions essential to institutional integrity and resilience. This paper advances a compassion-centered leadership model integrating ethical reasoning, relational engagement, and organizational learning. Compassion is conceived as a *normative relational practice*—a strategic capacity that aligns moral purpose with institutional adaptability. Drawing on reflective case study methodology, a personal framework of compassionate leadership is articulated through three interrelated pillars: (1) Values-Anchored Leadership, grounded in moral integrity; (2) Relational Leadership, fostering psychological safety and trust; and (3) Learning-Centered Leadership, enabling reflection and continuous adaptation. A case study of faculty resistance to curricular change demonstrates that compassion can transform fear into collective inquiry and collaboration. The analysis concludes that *compassion, courage, and reflective inquiry* constitute a triadic foundation for leading responsibly in higher education's uncertain future.

Keywords: *Compassion-centered leadership, organizational learning, ethical reasoning, relational engagement, higher education change.*

1. Introduction: Compassion as ethical, relational and adaptive practice

Contemporary universities operate as complex adaptive systems shaped by the upheaval of the pandemic, digital transformation, demographic volatility, and ethical strain (McClune, 2025). The emergent “compassion turn” in leadership studies (Waddington, 2021) argues that empathy, integrity, and moral attentiveness are prerequisites for institutional sustainability. Yet, leadership in higher education frequently defaults to managerial control, prioritizing procedural compliance over dialogic engagement and collective learning.

Organizational learning theory (Senge, 1990) positions learning as a process of iterative reflection and feedback through which institutions challenge assumptions and adapt meaningfully. Within higher education's volatile environment, leaders often resort to expedient, top-down solutions that prioritize continuity but suppress learning and innovation. Compassion-centered leadership challenges this tendency by reasserting that the moral and emotional dimensions of change are central to organizational efficacy. This paper proposes a *compassion-centered leadership model* that integrates ethics, relational practice, and organizational learning. Compassion is reframed not as sentimental benevolence but as a *disciplined moral practice* that enables institutions to navigate loss, reinvention, and uncertainty without compromising human dignity.

The conceptual framework integrates three interrelated domains of leadership theory: ethical and values-based leadership, relational and distributed leadership, and adaptive leadership. Compassion operates across these domains as the connective energy linking moral integrity, human connection, and learning agility.

1.1. Ethical and values-based leadership

Ethical leaders function simultaneously as moral individuals and moral managers, modeling integrity and fairness (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Values-anchored leadership emphasizes clarity of purpose and transparency, ensuring that institutional decisions reflect shared moral commitments. Denney (2021)

identifies *courage, compassion, and resilience* as a “Golden Braid” essential for transformative leadership. Speaks, Herman and LaForme (2025) advocate for centering appreciation as the foundation of effective leadership – arguing that in doing so it is possible to build gratitude, connection, clarity, and purpose in the workplace. By anchoring change in moral purpose, compassion acts as an ethical bridge between organizational necessity and human care—a mechanism for aligning institutional survival with moral legitimacy and trust.

1.2. Relational and distributed leadership

Relational perspectives conceive leadership as a social process enacted through interactions (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Compassion deepens this emphasis by generating psychological safety and inclusion. When collaboration is rooted in empathetic recognition, fear gives way to curiosity. This reflects Waddington and Belak’s (2021) vision of the compassionate university as a systemic culture of empathy, cooperation, and ethical responsiveness. Similarly, McClune (2025) tasks universities as an entity to become more caring and focused on the individual needs of faculty and staff, as well as on student success. Compassion thus evolves from private sentiment to public ethic—a collective capacity that sustains intellectual and relational vitality.

1.3. Adaptive leadership

Adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz et al., 2009) frames leadership as the art of mobilizing people to confront challenges, learn, and adapt. A compassionate leader balances innovation with moral grounding, ensuring that adaptation enhances, rather than erodes, institutional values. Compassion here functions as an interpretive practice—mediating between the pressures of transformation and the preservation of meaning within academic communities.

2. A model of compassion-centered leadership

The synthesis of ethical, relational, and adaptive dimensions yields a self-reinforcing cycle: *ethical integrity sustains relationships; relationships enable learning; learning renews ethical purpose*. Compassion serves as the integrative force that allows change to be experienced as a natural outgrowth of community norms rather than as a threat.

The model is comprised of three interdependent pillars. Values-anchored leadership is grounded in ethical clarity to ensure that decision-making aligns with moral principles and shared institutional purpose. Relational leadership fosters empathy, trust, and psychology safety to enable open dialogue, inclusion, and collective problem-solving. Learning-center leadership is oriented toward reflection, and adaptation transforms challenges into opportunities for shared growth. Through the integration of these pillars, compassion functions as both a *motive* (why we lead) and a *method* (how we lead), enabling higher education institutions to respond creatively to uncertainty.

3. Methodology: Reflective case study approach

A reflective case study methodology was used to develop and refine a personal framework for compassionate leadership, integrating conceptual synthesis with practice-based reflection. Following Stake (1995) and Argyris’s (1978) *double-loop learning*, the process emphasized iterative learning between theory and lived experience.

3.1. Process phases

These 4 process phases result in an iterative cycle that grounds conceptual rigor in the lived complexity of academic leadership and reinforces compassion as a practical mode of ethical inquiry. The first phase is *observation and documentation*, where the ethically charged leadership encounter is identified and recorded. Second is *conceptual mapping*, where individuals interpret emergent patterns through ethical, relational, and learning-centered lenses. The third phase is *model refinement*, where the theoretical and experiential insights are synthesized into guiding principles and behaviors. Finally, is the *application and feedback* phase. In this phase, individuals apply the model in practice, solicit peer reflection, and modify accordingly.

The following case study demonstrates one complete iteration of this cycle.

4. Case study: Leading compassionately through faculty resistance

4.1. Observation and documentation (context)

A University's Humanities Department faced declining enrollment, evolving student interests, and administrative pressure to integrate artificial intelligence (AI) into the curriculum. As the department chair initiated a reform process, resistance emerged from Dr. L., a senior professor concerned that AI might dilute the tradition of humanistic scholarship and render her expertise obsolete. Beneath resistance lay anxiety about relevance and professional identity, which the chair approached with curiosity.

4.2. Conceptual mapping and model refinement: Compassionate leadership model

4.2.1. Values-anchored engagement. The chair reaffirmed the department's shared mission—educating students for ethical human interpretation in a digital age—thus framing curricular reform as an ethical continuation rather than a rupture of values. This alignment restored moral coherence and reduced the perception of imposed change.

4.2.2 Relational dialogue. Through individual conversations, the chair listened with empathy, validated Dr. L.'s concerns, and disclosed personal uncertainty. Departmental listening sessions invited mutual reflection, transforming defensive postures into collaborative curiosity. This enactment of Waddington's (2021) principle—that compassion begins with recognition—helped rehumanize the change process.

4.2.3. Adaptive leadership. Recognizing the potential for growth within resistance, the chair invited Dr. L. to be part of a learning community that will serve as a “train the trainers” model for the college. Dr. L. agreed and has been actively engaged in conversations with her peers from other disciplines. By granting meaningful participation and influence, the process redirected anxiety into intellectual engagement.

4.3. Application and feedback

After the first listening session, the chair noted that faculty seemed guarded and revised the approach. When Dr. L. initially declined to be involved, the chair re-conceptualized the invitation as an opportunity for intellectual leadership. This modification proved pivotal. Dr. L.'s defensive stance evolved into advocacy, and the department achieved both curricular innovation and renewed cohesion. The case demonstrates how compassion transforms emotional resistance into reflective collaboration, validating its role as a catalyst for adaptive organizational learning.

5. Analysis

The case substantiates compassion as the mediating force connecting *values, relationships, and learning*. Ethical anchoring grounds legitimacy and moral trust, easing fears of change. Relational empathy nurtures safety and inclusion, allowing for candid conversations. Learning orientation channels emotion into creativity, innovation, and problem-solving.

- Together, these dimensions produce *adaptive resilience*—the capacity of an organization to evolve without losing moral direction. Compassion thus emerges not as a peripheral virtue but as an operational principle structuring how leaders interpret and respond to complexity. Without compassion, the four-phase process becomes mere technique; with compassion, it becomes transformative practice.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Recent scholarship situates compassion as a strategic competence in educational leadership. Denney (2021) describes compassion, courage, and resilience as intertwined threads enabling leaders to sustain transformation under pressure. Waddington (2021) extends this logic, interpreting compassion as attentiveness to human vulnerability within bureaucratic systems. Compassion-centered leadership therefore bridges the often-fragmented divides between managerial efficiency, ethical purpose, and emotional intelligence.

In higher education, where intellectual and moral labor intersect, compassion becomes a vital epistemic stance—one that acknowledges suffering, curiosity, and hope as collective resources for reform. By embedding compassion within organizational structures and discourse, leaders foster environments where conflict becomes an opportunity for mutual understanding rather than polarization.

The illustrative case demonstrates that when leaders apply the four process phases and engage resistance with empathy and integrity, they convert fear into constructive inquiry, enabling both individuals and institutions to grow. In doing so, compassionate leadership redefines success—not as conformity or control—but as the *shared capacity to learn, evolve, and remain humane* amid perpetual change.

The deeper implication is that compassion anchors leadership in the paradox of strength and sensitivity: the courage to act decisively paired with the willingness to remain vulnerably open. Leadership in higher education’s uncertain future may thus depend less on managerial expertise than on the moral imagination to lead with compassion as both compass and catalyst.

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