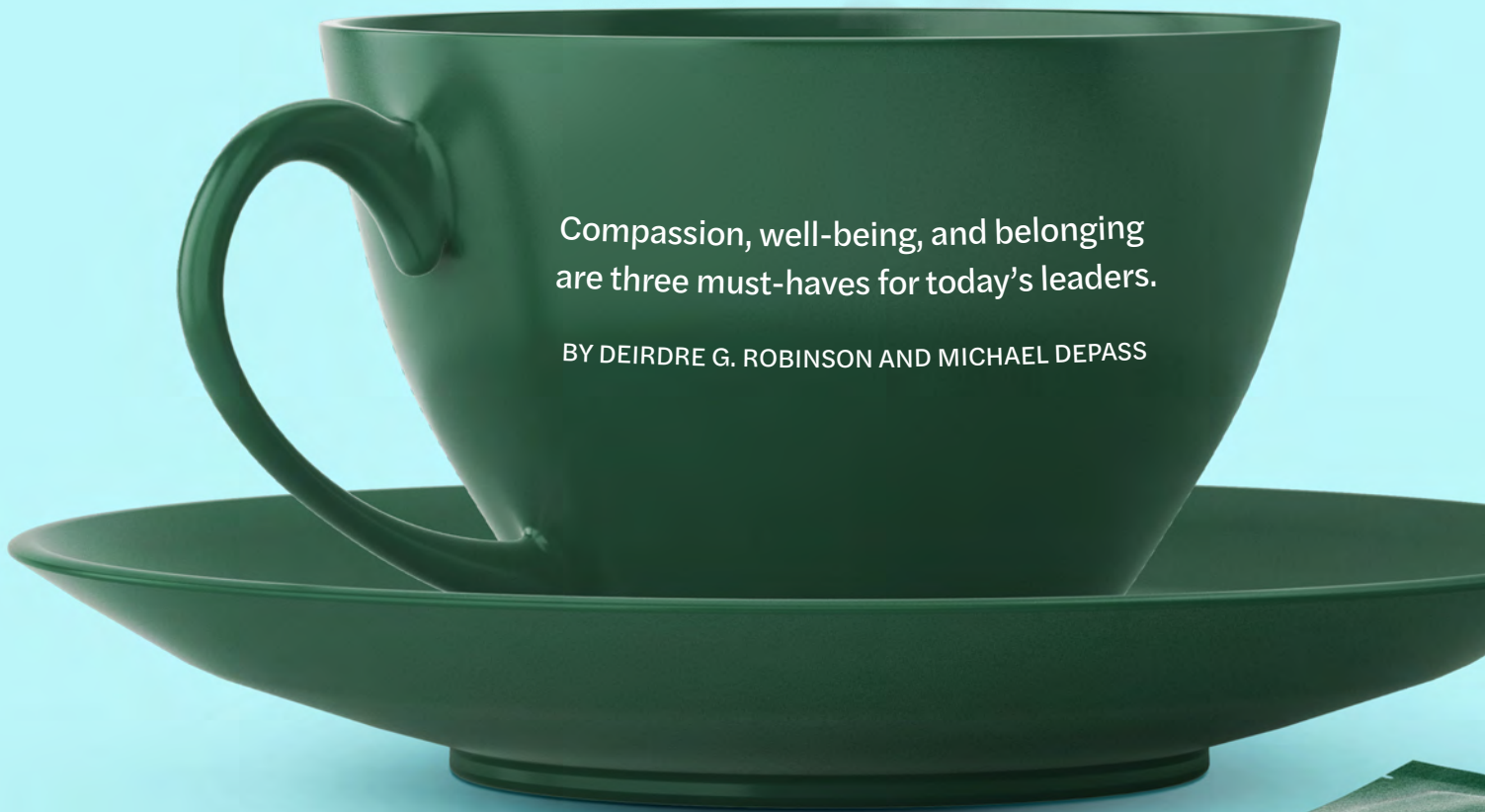


**Regardless of the industry,** workplaces look a lot different now than they did just a few years ago, and the change goes beyond hybrid workplaces and flexible schedules. Many organizations are struggling to navigate burnout and exclusion. Generative artificial intelligence is creating massive uncertainty about what the new normal will be for the roles of humans and machines.

Compassion, well-being, and belonging are three must-haves for today's leaders.

BY DEIRDRE G. ROBINSON AND MICHAEL DEPASS



*LeadWell*

What  
*Better*  
Leadership  
Looks Like



*3 Ingredients*

COMPASSION

WELL-BEING

BELONGING



**Leader attitudes and behaviors have a major impact on how safe their teams feel.**

There's a war for talent, and turnover is expensive. As employees and employers require more of their leaders than ever before, talent development professionals are recognizing that it's not enough to develop the same, traditional leadership skills.

Amid tremendous external pressure, rapidly evolving industries and technology, and transforming talent expectations, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) uncovered three focus areas that can make or break an organization: compassion, well-being, and belonging. Working in tandem, those focus areas transform organizational cultures; build healthy, collaborative relationships; and take companies from just getting by to thriving. The good news: TD professionals have the power to build and strengthen all of them.

### **Compassionate leadership strengthens culture**

Karissa McKenna, who is responsible for CCL's Leadership Development Program, explains that leaders are charged with creating shared direction, alignment, and commitment with their team members. To do that, they need to foster relationships with people built on compassion.

"Compassionate leaders make it easier for good people to do great work," McKenna says. They are aware of their team members'

challenges and feel a genuine concern—coupled with a willingness to take action. They look for systemic ways to reduce friction.

Those actions don't have to be grand gestures. In fact, McKenna explains that compassion shows up in the smallest of ways: "We see it in those moment-by-moment acknowledgements of what's hard, what hurts, what is joyous, exciting, or disappointing."

TD professionals can enable compassionate leadership behaviors in everyday interactions by prioritizing in leadership development initiatives psychological safety, listening, and recognizing biases.

**Psychological safety.** Help all leaders create a culture that invites people to bring their authentic selves to work. In a psychologically safe environment, employees feel comfortable speaking up, asking questions, sharing concerns, and respectfully disagreeing.

Leader attitudes and behaviors have a major impact on how safe their teams feel. CCL has found that many first-time leaders are afraid to make mistakes or take risks, which limits innovation and collaboration.

Contribute to establishing a strong foundation of trust, connection, and freedom from uncertainty by making psychological safety an explicit priority. That means connecting it to the organization's mission and explaining why it leads to innovation, team engagement, and inclusion. Model the behaviors you wish to see.

And don't forget the importance of kindness. According to the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* article "Supervision Incivility and Employee Psychological Safety in the Workplace," supervisor incivility affects psychological safety as far as two levels down in an organization. In short, a lack of psychological safety may be hindering emerging leaders from making bigger contributions at their companies and stepping into larger leadership roles.

**Listening.** When someone has a curious mindset, they notice others' challenges and take the time to ask questions to expand their scope of understanding. People cannot show compassion unless they are truly listening to one another.

Leaders don't need to have all the answers, McKenna adds, but when they listen for facts—as well as the feelings and values behind those facts—they show that they care, and they learn more about where their people are coming from. The result is that employees will feel seen, even if their condition can't change in all the ways they would like.

Therefore, provide tools and resources to aid in developing active listening skills, which includes techniques such as paying attention, withholding judgment, reflecting, clarifying, summarizing, and sharing. Once employees feel that leaders are listening, understanding, and showing compassion, the culture will begin to shift.

**Recognizing biases.** To develop a culture of compassion, leaders at all levels and functions must address conscious and unconscious biases. Such biases distort people's standards for themselves and others.

Promoting an inclusive work culture is only possible by helping employees gain deeper insight into what bias is and how it affects everyone. To do so, take a three-step approach:

1. Set expectations for open and respectful communication, which includes maintaining a curious mindset.
2. Implement effective training solutions that include resources and tools that help employees identify and manage both conscious and unconscious biases.
3. Tell the story of a leader discovering their own bias and taking action to correct—it will inspire others to do the same.

### The keys to well-being and leadership

Compassionate leaders know that when their employees have a sense of well-being, they're more engaged and creative. According to Gallup, employees with a sense of well-being also have higher job satisfaction and productivity levels.

Plus, it's a leader's job to care, points out Paige Graham, an executive coach and facilitator. "As a leader, it's your duty to take care of others and to create an environment where others can be well."

Graham thinks of well-being as feeling good and functioning well—both individually and as a community. The community part is especially important. In the early days of the pandemic and throughout the Great Resignation, many employers scrambled to help leaders optimize their personal effectiveness with an increased focus on self-care.

While self-care is important, CCL research shows that a broader focus on community, connection, and belonging is required to achieve true employee well-being. Humans have a basic need to connect with others,

including in a professional setting. Unfortunately, leaders sometimes feel they're lacking support from workplace relationships. "Loneliness is a professional hazard of senior positions," reveals the *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*' "Lonely at the Top: How Do Senior Leaders Navigate the Need to Belong?"

People want to work for companies that give them an opportunity to do meaningful work, grow, and work on a team where everyone is encouraged to thrive. Therefore, ensure your organization is focusing on the following three components of well-being to help their people feel good and function well.

**Purpose.** Employees feel a sense of purpose when they believe their work has intrinsic value and meaning. Sometimes that's as easy as recognition. "It's helpful to recognize the parts of our jobs that bring us energy and are aligned to what we believe is meaningful," says Graham. She adds that value alignment is especially key for younger generations.



## Unlocking Three Pillars to (Better) Leadership

As part of the Center for Creative Leadership's (Better) Leadership Project, CCL identified three focus areas—compassion, well-being, and belonging—that are critical to effective leadership in today's world. To do so, experts explored the tools and skills organizations and leaders are searching for; examined social and industry trends; and analyzed market research data that CCL has collected over years of leadership training. Next, CCL uncovered specific actions leaders can take to enhance the three focus areas for themselves and their teams.

Leaders can facilitate that sense of purpose by helping their staff connect day-to-day tasks with the organization's mission, vision, and values. Consider suggesting a toolkit that includes how to provide feedback.

**Growth.** Because humans crave a challenge, employee well-being enhances when people feel they're growing and learning. Facilitate that growth by prioritizing a learning culture so employees feel free to take risks in the name of creativity and innovation.

Also encourage leaders to celebrate wins and losses during meetings, creating space for staff to share what went wrong—and what they learned. When leaders share their own lessons learned, they help solidify a psychologically safe culture.

**Agency.** Even in manufacturing environments where standardization is critical, it is bad practice for supervisors to stand over every individual's shoulder to ensure they are completing their tasks according to standards. Instead, direct reports should receive training, gain access to the tools they need, and possess the agency to do their work.

The same principle applies across industries, as well as up and down the organizational chart. Be sure that executives and senior leaders feel equipped with the training, knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors they and their staff need to succeed. Then, support those senior leaders in empowering their direct reports to make decisions that are best for the company.

Purpose, growth, and agency help leaders prioritize healthy practices for themselves and others. As a result, broader changes ripple out. Employee well-being brings about new mindsets and practices that enhance the culture of the entire organization.

### Build belonging at work

To complete the (better) leadership trifecta, work to build belonging. When people feel included, they're more comfortable asking for help and contributing to colleagues' success. Rather than feeling territorial over their own accomplishments, staff communicate freely and innovate together.

Employees of historically underrepresented groups often report experiencing “belonging un-

certainty,” or a perceived lack of security. In addition to being excluded, they frequently get treated negatively based on stereotypes by others in the workplace. Stephanie Wormington, CCL's director of global strategic research, describes it as “like carrying a heavy backpack that you can never set down, and if you're walking around feeling weighed down all the time, it's hard to engage fully or think creatively.”

Wormington explains belonging uncertainty's tie to equity: “When one person on a team is carrying around an empty backpack while another is geared up for a week-long backpacking trip, it's going to be much easier for the first person to walk up the hill.”

Research from *Science Advances* shows that leaders have the power to influence belonging and belonging uncertainty in the workplace, even through brief interventions. Help leaders create a culture of belonging by establishing intentional opportunities for connection, flipping the script on uncertainty and failure, and showing humility by not assuming others' experiences.

**Create intentional opportunities for connection.** Encourage leaders to cultivate a welcoming culture for new hires. It's easy to be friendly when showing new employees the ropes. More meaningful, however, is making people feel that they belong. That means leaders not only recognize the perspectives and skills that each employee brings to the table, but they also value those life experiences.

Facilitating connections can sometimes be easier said than done. People have different preferences for connecting with others and being social.

As important as hosting big gatherings is, prioritizing consistent opportunities for individuals to get to know each other—such as optional weekly or monthly departmental meetings that are solely for relationship building and fun—can be just as powerful for building a sense of belonging. Those are also great opportunities to celebrate milestones, such as work anniversaries.

Another way to help employees connect is to build, support, and advocate for employee resource groups, which give staff an opportunity to connect with others across certain commonalities. Typically, they comprise employees who may not have worked together but share common experiences and social identities.

**Flip the script on uncertainty and failure.** A lot of people who experience belonging uncertainty think they're the only ones who feel isolated. In truth, most people have experienced belonging uncertainty at some point.



Thus, remind senior leaders that while it can be difficult to be vulnerable, they can set the tone by staying open to whatever employees share, modeling vulnerability, and communicating their own journeys.

During times of transition, such as onboarding or new managerial responsibilities, senior members of the team can offer mentorship. When authenticity shines through during coaching and mentorship programs, leaders build trust and foster an enhanced culture of belonging.

**Show humility by not assuming others' experiences.** As leaders create space for connection and model authenticity, they give employees openings to talk about their own experiences with belonging and belonging uncertainty. When that happens, leaders should remain open and choose their words wisely.

"We all have our own lived experiences, so it's important not to downplay or invalidate others," Wormington states, reminding leaders not to push their employees to share their personal lives. "Your job is simply to provide the space, not force anyone to share."

The degree to which people are willing to self-disclose can have deep cultural roots. If an employee chooses not to share their personal life that doesn't mean they don't want to connect or belong. It's dangerous for leaders to assume that staff they don't hear from or relate to are "just shy," for example. Instead, leaders should consider other explanations and foster trusting relationships over time.

Most importantly, leaders must understand that belonging is built on trust and connection. Leaders foster belonging at work when they ac-

knowledge that some people are inequitably burdened and that everyone brings value through their experiences and perspectives.

### Leadership transformed

For true culture transformation to take place, a new type of leadership is in order. Through the (Better) Leadership Project, CCL has discovered that TD professionals must expand their focus on individual skill development to include a broader scope—one that encompasses compassion, well-being, and belonging. When those human-centered pillars take center stage, employees feel good, they know without a doubt that their perspectives are valued, and innovation flourishes.

**Deirdre G. Robinson** is chief HR officer at the Center for Creative Leadership; [robinsond@ccl.org](mailto:robinsond@ccl.org).

**Michael DePass** is vice president of equity, diversity, and inclusion at the Center for Creative Leadership; [depassm@ccl.org](mailto:depassm@ccl.org).

## What Better Leadership Looks Like

LeadWell

### How Leaders Can Facilitate Team Conversations

When talent development professionals expand traditional ideas about what constitutes good leadership, they're able to transform their organizations' cultures. To build on what works, leaders first must let go of what doesn't.

Understanding what is and isn't working requires communication and collaboration—two actions that can take place in person or virtually. The following tips can help leaders facilitate conversations with employees about compassion, well-being, and belonging.

- Ask open-ended questions to understand one another's perspectives. Listen to colleagues' feedback and experiences with a curious mindset.
- Don't worry about thoughtful silences; some people may need time to think through their answers.
- If you feel comfortable sharing, offer personal experiences as examples or to help facilitate the conversation.
- As one team member speaks, keep an eye on the other team members. If you feel they have a desire to participate, invite them to join the discussion by sharing their experiences or perspectives.
- Resist the urge to judge or become defensive if you disagree with feedback. Remember that you want to facilitate a candid conversation that builds trust.
- If team members share positive experiences with leaders who have shown compassion or successfully enhanced well-being and belonging, encourage the team members to think about how they can apply similar actions toward their peers.
- Offer to share ideas for organization-wide initiatives to increase compassion, well-being, or belonging with senior executives.



# SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

## Interested in subscribing to *TD* magazine?

### Rates

**\$180** Individual Domestic (US)

**\$331** Institutional Domestic (US)

**\$279** Individual International

**\$430** Institutional International

To subscribe, go to [td.org/TDsub](http://td.org/TDsub).

### Get even more when you become an ATD member!

All ATD memberships include a monthly subscription\* to *TD* magazine, plus access to webinars, digital publications, research, discounts on conferences, and much more.

For details about ATD membership, visit [td.org/membership](http://td.org/membership).

\*International members outside the US, Canada, and Puerto Rico receive the digital *TD* magazine as part of their membership.