How mindfulness-trained leaders drive self and other-oriented compassion

Article

Accepted Version

How Mindfulness-Trained Leaders Drive Self and Other-Oriented Compassion

Abstract

To advance research on compassion in leadership, we investigate if and how mindfulness interventions can help develop self- and other-oriented compassion in organizations. We present findings of a longitudinal qualitative study on 62 leaders who participated in an eight-week long mindfulness intervention. The data for analysis, collected at four time-points during a course of one year, comprises pre-intervention assessments and post-intervention interviews (in total 159 interviews), including six- and twelve-month follow-ups. We find mechanisms underpinning *co-active compassion*—i.e., a reciprocal interplay observed between self- and other-oriented compassion—, such as interconnectedness, perspective-taking, and mutual support, which manifest at the individual and collective levels. This study makes a theoretical contribution by revealing how a reciprocal interplay between self-care and the care for others enhances both individual and collective compassionate competencies in leadership. This study also shows that mindful self-compassion is a dynamic, interpersonal phenomenon, crucial for leaders who aim to effectively balance self-care with their responsibility towards others.

Keywords

compassion, leadership, leadership development, mindfulness, mindfulness intervention, other-oriented compassion, self-compassion, qualitative research

Introduction

Enhancing one's self-care abilities can significantly elevate leadership qualities. However, during tumultuous periods, the concept of self-care can appear as an elusive utopia for a leader who is simultaneously grappling with the demands of professional responsibilities and personal life. This balance, though challenging, is crucial for effective leadership and the overall quality of people's working life (Guest et al., 2022). Research examining leader self-compassion—that is "a mindset in which a leader takes a supportive, kind, and non-judgmental stance toward himself or herself in relation to challenges faced in a leader role"—has noted the psychological and organizational benefits it can bring, such as strengthening leader identity, helping behavior (Lanaj et al., 2022, p. 1543) and resilience at work (Lefebvre et al., 2020). It has been noted that leaders have a vital role in legitimizing the effect of compassion at the workplace (Frost et al., 2000; Lilius et al., 2008) and in influencing organizational norms that others notice, connect with, respond to, and replicate (Lilius et al., 2011).

A key challenge for scholars and practitioners relates to understanding how the competencies of leader self- and other-oriented compassion can be trained and developed in organizations. According to Neff (2023, p. 193), self-compassion entails six different components: "increased self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness as well as reduced self-judgment, isolation, and overidentification". Mindfulness—the practice of being present and attentive to one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences without judgment (Brown and Ryan, 2003)—as a major component can be leveraged to address the problem, given that self-compassion suggests learning "to fully accept our present-moment experience as it is without resistance while still holding our pain in the warm embrace of compassion" (Neff and Dahm, 2014, p. 121). Moreover, self-compassion and mindfulness are closely knit together in the form of a continuous routine consisting of formal mindfulness practices and an informal

'way of being' mindful on a daily basis (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Even though recent reviews describe self-compassion as a "set of malleable states that can be developed through […] interventions" (e.g., Lefebvre et al., 2020, p. 437), the potential to develop the competencies for leader self- and other-oriented compassion through such organizational interventions remains under-explored.

The solution therefore is to examine if, and *how* leader mindfulness interventions can help develop self- and other-oriented compassion in organizations. Specifically, we ask: *how* do mindfulness interventions contribute to the development of leaders' self- and other-oriented compassionate mindset and practices? Employing an in-depth qualitative, longitudinal intervention design, we report the experiences of 62 organizational leaders who participated in an eight-week mindfulness training followed by a total of 159 post-intervention interviews conducted over the course of one year. Precisely, our data comprises four phases: 62 written pre-intervention assessments, 62 immediate post-intervention interviews, 51 six-month follow-up interviews, and 46 twelve-month follow-up interviews.

We contribute to the literature on compassion in leadership (Shuck et al., 2019), specifically focusing on leader self-compassion. We show how mindfulness learning and practice helped leaders adopt a self-compassionate mindset and establish self-care practices that they found also enabled leading others, which translated into a compassionate mindset toward others and actions in caring for others. We identified a co-activation process (Myers, 2018) that orchestrated a reciprocal interplay observed between self- and other-oriented compassion toward compassionate leadership development, which we introduced as *co-active compassion* coupled with its key mechanisms. Such introduction improves our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of compassion to move across individual and collective levels (Wee and Fehr, 2021). In addition, the adopted longitudinal methodological design makes a unique contribution to the self-compassion literature. In contrast to the dominant self-report

measures in self-compassion studies (Neff, 2022), we show that a mindfulness intervention approach can support establishing and maintaining self-compassionate practices in the long term. Overall, the findings suggest that mindful self-compassion in leadership is not merely a static intrapersonal phenomenon but a dynamic interpersonal phenomenon, as leaders who take care of themselves actively consider others to take care of them.

Literature review

Compassion in organizations

Compassion constitutes a core aspect of the human experience. The extant compassion literature describes it in terms of either an individual response to personal suffering (Lilius et al., 2011) or a collective response to a specific incident of human suffering (Dutton et al., 2006). In particular, the seminal definition entails three aspects that focus on "… noticing another person's suffering, empathically feeling another person's pain, and acting in a manner to ease the suffering" (Lilius et al., 2008, p. 94-95). Research on compassion originates in the 1980s in compassion focused therapy, which assumes that humans' capacity for affiliative, caring, and altruistic motives, emotions and behaviors can be developed (Gilbert, 2014). The literature on compassion has burgeoned since then with scholarly reviews, meta-analysis and empirical studies (e.g., Dutton et al., 2014; Kirby et al., 2017; Strauss et al., 2016; Wee and Fehr, 2021), espousing both physiological and psychological benefits of training people in it (Desbordes et al., 2013; Jazaieri et al., 2013; Weng et al., 2013).

The importance of compassion in organizations stems from its roots in addressing suffering and providing care (Heaphy et al., 2022; Lilius et al., 2011), as well as being a value-based action (McCracken & Yang, 2008) that fosters positive interpersonal interactions and supports overall well-being (Worline and Dutton, 2017). As a crucial aspect of human interaction, compassion is particularly relevant in the context of organizations where

individuals work together toward common goals. Compassion is a complex, multifaceted construct that can be understood as both other-oriented and self-oriented (see, e.g., Quaglia et al., 2021). Other-oriented compassion relates to the understanding and sensitivity towards the suffering of others, coupled with the motivation and action to alleviate that suffering (Goetz et al., 2010; Quaglia et al., 2021). Self-compassion, on the other hand, involves extending the same understanding and care towards oneself, recognizing one's own suffering, and taking action to alleviate it (Neff, 2012; Quaglia et al., 2021). Both other-oriented and self-oriented compassion are linked to mindfulness (e.g., Fulton, 2018), which is the practice of being present and attentive to one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences without judgment (Brown and Ryan, 2003). Individuals often exhibit greater compassion toward others than toward themselves, but cultivating self-compassion can lead to more compassionate behavior toward others (see Neff, 2023 for reviews). This interplay between self-compassion and other-oriented compassion can be further explored and developed through mindfulness interventions that facilitate emotional awareness, self-regulation, and empathy.

Mindfulness and compassion

In a recent review of mindfulness in leadership (Urrila, 2022), a key area of discussion has been whether to focus on the individual or collective aspects. On the one hand, mindfulness may be examined as an *intra*personal phenomenon. From this perspective, mindfulness could bring about psychological and work-related benefits to an individual, for instance, reduced stress (e.g., Crivelli et al., 2019), and improved job performance (e.g., Dane and Brummel, 2014). Mindfulness interventions can be a powerful tool for developing self-compassion, as they encourage self-awareness, self-acceptance, and emotional regulation. By practicing mindfulness, individuals can learn to recognize and accept their own suffering, develop a kind and compassionate inner dialogue, and ultimately respond more effectively to their own and others' emotional needs. This increased capacity for self-compassion can have a

significant impact on organizational functioning, particularly when it comes to leaders who have a strong influence on the workplace environment (see Dodson and Heng, 2022 for reviews).

On the other hand, however, mindfulness can be looked at as an *inter*personal phenomenon, potentially bringing benefits to the community (e.g., Ni et al., 2023; Urrila and Mäkelä, 2022). In the words of Skoranski and colleagues (2019), one of the main proponents of the interpersonal view, the development of empathy and compassion, and ethical conduct are key components of mindfulness that motivate the examination of mindfulness as an experience that is shared between people.

Research indicates that mindfulness in relationships manifests as prosocial emotions such as kindness, empathy, and compassion (Donald et al., 2019; Skoranski et al., 2019). Mindfulness can help people regulate personal distress, which has been found to determine how kindly people respond to others (Donald et al., 2019; Skoranski et al., 2019). Moreover, a meta-analysis conducted by Donald et al. (2019) suggests that trait mindfulness and prosocial behaviors, i.e., actions intended to benefit others (helping), are linked, and that mindfulness meditation practice enhances prosocial behaviors via the mechanism of empathetic concern/compassion. As indicated by Donald et al. (2019), mindfulness may foster prosocial behaviors through the mechanisms of increased attentional capacities and bodily awareness, which may result in increased awareness of the needs of others, increased positive emotions such as joy and gratitude associated with helping behaviors, enhanced affect regulation resulting in responding more kindly to others despite negative experiences, reperceiving i.e., considering thoughts just as mental events instead of literal truths associated with approach instead of avoidance behaviors, and a more flexible sense of self resulting in responding more helpfully to others. Prosocial behaviors foster cooperation and cohesion

among groups (Donald et al., 2019). Therefore, it stands to reason that the individual and collective aspects of mindfulness in social relations, such as leadership, are interrelated.

Once the emotions-related aspects of mindfulness in relationships have been studied, their focus has been on emotional awareness and cultivating prosocial emotions such as kindness, empathy, and compassion via interventions (for a review see Galante et al., 2014). For example, Karremans and colleagues (2020) reported mindfulness and mindfulness meditation to be associated with interpersonal forgiveness among romantic partners. In regards to what type of mindfulness meditation is best for inducing such prosocial emotions as kindness or compassion towards others, the effectiveness of compassion-based mindfulness interventions (Galante et al., 2014) and loving-kindness meditation (Fredrickson et al., 2008) has been confirmed, but, notably, it has been shown that compassion meditation does not induce positive emotions any more than "regular" mindfulness meditation (Condon et al., 2013; Donald et al., 2019). Research indicates that, given mindfulness is an integral part of compassion, mindfulness training may develop self-compassion even when not directly taught (Donald et al., 2019).

In sum, in the context of leadership, mindfulness may be conceptualized as a practice-based inter-individual phenomenon occurring in the social and interactional context of work. Compassion and self-compassion are leader competencies that can be developed through practice.

Leader role compassion

Leader role compassion considers both self- and other-oriented compassion (Lanaj et al., 2022). The importance of a leader's self-compassion becomes more evident when considering the various challenges that leaders face in their roles. As they navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, handle 'toxins' or emotionally harmful behaviors (Frost, 2011) and deal with emotional exhaustion (Schabram and Heng, 2022) or compassion fatigue (Abendroth, 2011),

self-compassion becomes an essential resource for maintaining resilience, empathy, and effectiveness in leadership (Lefebvre et al., 2020; Lewis and Ebbeck, 2014). Cultivating self-compassion among leaders can lead to a range of positive outcomes, both for the leaders themselves and for the organizations they lead.

Potential benefits of leader self-compassion include, for instance, improved leader well-being (see, e.g., Neff, 2004). By practicing self-compassion, leaders can enhance their emotional well-being, reduce feelings of stress and burnout, and maintain a more balanced and resilient emotional state (e.g., Schabram and Heng, 2022). This can, in turn, contribute to better decision-making, increased creativity, and more effective leadership overall. In addition, a leader's self-compassion can enhance interpersonal relationships. Self-compassionate leaders are more likely to demonstrate empathy, understanding, and support toward their team members, leading to stronger and more trusting relationships within the workplace (see, e.g., Waldron and Ebbeck, 2015). This can promote a more cohesive, cooperative, and engaged team dynamic, ultimately improving organizational performance. Further, leader self-compassion can generate positive stakeholder perceptions. Research has shown that leader self-compassion may contribute to more effective leader behaviors and positive stakeholder perceptions by strengthening leader identity (Lanaj et al., 2022). When leaders exhibit self-compassion, they are better able to model compassionate behavior, create a supportive work environment, and foster a culture of trust and respect among their team members. This can lead to increased job satisfaction, employee engagement, and organizational commitment among stakeholders. Furthermore, such leaders often engage in ethical decision-making. Self-compassionate leaders are more likely to consider the well-being of others (see e.g., Ramachandran et al., 2023) when making decisions and are less likely to engage in unethical behaviors. Also, by cultivating a strong sense of self-compassion, leaders can develop a heightened awareness of the potential impact of their

actions on others (Lewis and Ebbeck, 2014), ultimately leading to more ethical and responsible decision-making.

To elucidate further, in particular for effective leadership role in many contemporary organizations, few rationales may explain promoting self-compassion among leaders. First, it can facilitate responding to interpersonal challenges and handling toxins (Frost, 2011). Leaders often encounter a range of interpersonal challenges in their roles, which can include managing conflicts, providing feedback, and addressing underperformance. Navigating these complex dynamics requires a level of emotional intelligence and self-awareness that can be bolstered by self-compassion. By practicing self-compassion, leaders can better understand their own emotions, accept their limitations, and respond more effectively to the emotional needs of their team members. “Toxins” are emotionally harmful behaviors that can manifest in various forms within an organization, such as bullying, passive-aggressive communication, or the suppression of dissenting opinions (Frost, 2011). Leaders play a critical role in addressing and mitigating these toxic behaviors, as their actions can either perpetuate or alleviate the emotional harm caused by such behaviors (Dua et al., 2023). Self-compassionate leaders are more likely to recognize the impact of toxins on themselves and others and take appropriate action to address them, promoting a healthier and more supportive work environment. Second, it can improve response to emotional exhaustion, compassion burnout, and fatigue (Abendroth, 2011; Schabram and Heng, 2022). Leadership roles often involve high levels of emotional labor, as leaders are expected to manage their own emotions while attending to the emotional well-being of their team members. This can lead to emotional exhaustion, compassion burnout, or fatigue (Sprang et al., 2007), which can negatively impact a leader's ability to empathize, make sound decisions, and maintain a positive work environment. Self-compassion can act as a buffer against these detrimental effects by encouraging leaders to prioritize their own well-being, engage in self-care, and seek support

when needed. By doing so, leaders can better sustain their capacity for empathy and compassion, ultimately fostering more resilience and effective leadership at work (cf. Lefebvre et al., 2020). Third and finally, it can help develop leader self-compassion through practice (Donald et al., 2019). Given the importance of self-compassion in leadership, it is essential to consider how this competency can be developed and nurtured. Research suggests that self-compassion and other-oriented compassion can be cultivated through practice (Lefebvre et al., 2020), with interventions specifically tailored for leaders. Some of these interventions include, for example, compassion-focused therapy, loving-kindness meditation, mindfulness training. Compassion-focused therapy is a therapeutic approach that aims to develop an individual's capacity for compassion and self-compassion by addressing feelings of shame, self-criticism, and fear. Leaders who engage in compassion-focused therapy can learn to challenge negative self-talk, cultivate a kinder inner dialogue, and develop more compassionate responses to their own and others' suffering. In addition, the loving-kindness meditation or Metta practice (often taught as part of a mindfulness training) involves focusing on cultivating feelings of love, kindness, and compassion towards oneself and others. By engaging in loving-kindness meditation, leaders can develop a more compassionate and caring inner dialogue, which can translate into more compassionate behavior towards themselves and their team members. Finally, mindfulness training such as meditation or mindful breathing exercises can help leaders become more aware of their thoughts, emotions, and experiences without judgment. By developing this non-judgmental awareness, leaders can better understand their own emotional needs and respond more effectively to the emotional needs of others. Research has shown that mindfulness training can lead to increased self-compassion even when self-compassion is not explicitly taught (Donald et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the importance of compassion, both self- and other-oriented, in organizations cannot be overstated. By understanding the interconnected nature of these two aspects of compassion and utilizing experimental (intervention) approaches to develop them, leaders can foster a more compassionate, supportive, and ultimately more effective workplace environment. However, the extant literature in this area remains an empirical puzzle as we lack in-depth qualitative, longitudinal interventions that unpack the processes and mechanisms through which such competencies are expressed and developed in modern workplaces. As research in this area continues to grow, despite being dominated by self-report measures (see Neff, 2022 for a review), the potential for utilizing mindfulness interventions to further understanding and application of these principles in organizational settings becomes increasingly promising.

Methods

We examined leaders' experiences of an eight-week mindfulness intervention, utilizing a qualitative mindfulness intervention approach that enabled an in-depth, longitudinal exploration of the mechanisms of compassionate leadership development. Qualitative intervention designs can shed light on the mechanisms (for instance, compassionate attitudes) that produce beneficial intervention outcomes (for instance, build leadership effectiveness) as participants utilize the resources of the intervention (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Warren et al., 2020). Given that intervention participants provide realistic accounts of how the intervention works for them, qualitative intervention designs can effectively uncover the subjective experiences of the intervention participants (Lambert et al., 2022; Warren et al., 2020). Further, instead of typical single "snapshot" techniques, utilizing longitudinal interview methods to explore participants' evolving experiences facilitates gaining a comprehensive insight of the long-term influences of the intervention (Murray et al., 2009).

Intervention

The purpose of the mindfulness research intervention was to increase the leader participants' knowledge of mindfulness, build their psychological and cognitive resources, and support their well-being and performance (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2022; Gilbert et al., 2018).

We partnered with a mindfulness training company to execute this intervention research. An experienced mindfulness trainer and business coach facilitated the research interventions and assisted in identifying and recruiting the participating organizations. Details concerning the intervention content, length, intensity, target participants, and schedule were agreed upon in collaboration.

In 2019, five eight-week mindfulness interventions were organized, one for each participating organization from diverse industries. Each intervention comprised six 90-minute-long group sessions at 1.5-week intervals. The program focused on increasing participants' understanding of mindfulness and introducing mindfulness practices. It took a practical approach, allowing participants to explore various techniques. Participants were given access to a mobile application that included 16 formal mindfulness practice recordings. Regular home practice (10-15 minutes per day) was encouraged, as it is a fundamental aspect of mindfulness interventions (Davidson and Kazniak, 2015). The program also emphasized the importance of integrating mindfulness into daily life through informal practices ('a mindful way of being'; Kabat-Zinn, 2011).

The program covered a range of topics. It also delved into mindfulness as a practice of kindness and compassion that is rooted in deep self-awareness and can be utilized to transcend suffering arising from judgment, fear, shame, guilt, and stress. The materials drew upon Neff's (2003) framework of compassion, which encompasses self-kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindfulness. Drawing inspiration from the 'loving-kindness meditation' (e.g., Galante et al., 2014), four mindfulness meditations were specifically

designed to cultivate compassion. Additionally, the module incorporated self-reflective exercises, such as taking a 'self-compassion break' and maintaining a gratitude journal.

Participants

The study sample comprised 62 leaders (56 female, 6 male) who willingly participated in the intervention provided by their organizations, and data collection. A 'leader' was defined as a manager or supervisor with direct reports, with an average of 17 direct reports per participant. The participants represented various industries, including health (22), insurance (17), forestry (9), information technology (10), and production (4). Their leadership experience ranged from one to 30 years, averaging 10 years. The participants' ages ranged from 26 to 63 years, with an average age of 45 years. Out of the participants, 52 were Finnish, while 10 had other European nationalities. The participants did not receive compensation for their participation in the research. The study adhered to research ethics principles. Participants were provided information about the data collection and handling procedures before granting their informed consent.

Data collection

The data for analysis were collected in four phases between January 2019 and November 2020 from 62 written pre-intervention assessments, 62 post-intervention interviews, fifty-one 6-month follow-up interviews, and forty-six 12-month follow-up interviews (in total 159 interviews). All participants completed the first two data collection steps. Forty-one completed all data collection steps. The attrition rate of participants between the first and third phases was 17.75 percent and between the first and fourth phases 25.81 percent. The intervention participants were requested to complete written pre-tasks prior to the start of the intervention. The task involved writing a self-reflective text where they shared their recent experiences and articulated their expectations for personal development and mindfulness training. Their length ranged from one to two pages of typewritten text. Following the

completion of the intervention, participants were interviewed. The purpose of these semi-structured interviews was to provide mindfulness training participants with an opportunity to share their experiences throughout the training process and discuss the perceived impacts on their reality and actions. Follow-up questions were asked, with examples requested for in-depth exploration. The interview duration ranged from 26 to 76 minutes (average 48 minutes). Additionally, follow-up interviews were scheduled approximately six and twelve months after the completion of the mindfulness training which offered insight into the participants' long-term experiences. Participants were encouraged to openly discuss their experiences related to mindfulness. The duration of the follow-up interviews, which were conducted remotely, ranged from 5 to 32 minutes (average 16 minutes).

Figure 1 illustrates the intervention and data collection procedures.

- -

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

- -

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the materials were uploaded to qualitative data analysis software. Each interviewee was assigned a code that consisted of a letter according to their intervention group (A-E) and a participant number within the group (e.g., A1). We deployed thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to distill the meaning of what is in the data. The data analysis process started with open engagement with the materials as the first author familiarized themselves with the content. The leaders' descriptions of their personal experiences of mindfulness training were studied. An initial engagement with the data had already begun before the interviewing phase when familiarizing oneself with the written materials. It became evident that the interviewed leaders' experiences before and after mindfulness training covered multiple areas of life, including personal well-being, work effectiveness, relationships, inner growth, and leadership. Keeping in mind the focus on compassion, the analytical process continued with the coding of the leaders' descriptions

concerning the related content. In the iterative coding of the raw data, themes and sub-themes were identified which accurately capture aspects of leader role compassion. To illustrate the findings, a conceptual model was developed (see Figure 2). In addition, Table 1 contains additional examples of data, further evidencing the identified patterns discussed next (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

- -
INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE
- -

Findings

First, we share an analysis of the leaders' experiences of suffering at work, based on pre-assessment texts collected from the participants prior to the intervention. In the three sections following that, we present the post-intervention findings collected at three time points: 1) Self-oriented compassion of mindfulness-trained leaders, 2) Other-oriented compassion of mindfulness-trained leaders, and 3) Co-active compassion.

Leaders' experiences of suffering at work

Prior to mindfulness training, leaders recounted various forms of challenges and suffering. Suffering originating from work itself most often concerned stress of heavy workload, changes involving downsizing and restructuring, and resourcing issues. Many shared experiences of having almost burned out because of the demands of work. Performance pressures and feeling devalued or disrespected in the organization were mentioned, too. Many reported difficulties with team members and team functioning, which often involved frustration and disappointment at them, as this example illustrates:

> We've always had a lot of absences … There's a pattern: someone is dealing with a cold, a stomach bug, or something … When the third employee calls, I can feel my irritation growing … It frustrates me, and I think: "Don't you understand at all the difficult situation you're leaving me in?" (B22)

Common sources of suffering flowing from outside of work included illness of oneself or close relatives and loss of loved ones. Many described family- and home-related hardships. This leader experienced loneliness:

> I live alone and my daily life revolves around work and self-focused leisure time … During Christmas I reflected on my loneliness, and … there (is) the undeniable impact of my best friend starting a relationship on my feelings. These clichéd negative emotions arise when one has not been successful in finding a romantic relationship. (A3)

Some discussed their concerns over colleagues or team members whom they witnessed struggling. As this quote highlights, leaders thought that suffering originating from outside the boundaries of work also require acknowledging and addressing at work:

> Many of my team members are going through challenging life situations. I hope to draw from my own life experience to offer them words of comfort and encouragement. (C13)

Self-oriented compassion

Self-oriented compassion entails being compassionate towards oneself and practicing self-care.

Being self-compassionate Covering the perceptional and affective aspects of self-oriented compassion, being self-compassionate refers to the capability to be kind and supportive toward oneself. The leaders often spoke about how they prioritized the well-being of their team members and neglected their own. Many were harsher toward themselves than others, and this was wearing them out. Due to educating themselves on mindfulness, they realized that it was necessary to support one's well-being amidst changes and demands. Along came self-respect, confidence, and authenticity, and encouraging self-talk. To describe the arising of a new kind of attitude during and after the mindfulness training, interviewees used words including "self-compassion", "lenience”,” mercifulness", and even "selfishness".

Taking a supportive and kind stance toward oneself involves the development of self-compassionate insight. Many had realized there were learnable tools available that could support them in their struggles, as reflected by this leader during a year-long period after the mindfulness training:

> (Before,) I just carried on ... like a rat in a wheel. ... Now, I feel that I have a concrete tool that I can help myself with ... Awareness (came) about the state I was in. ... You get older and realize that life is limited ... there must be a balance. It's not easy, and many others don't have the balance between work and spare time … either. (B7, Interview 1)

> I was hugely motivated to find a way to help myself … The benefit is so concrete; that maintains my motivation … Because I want good for myself ... If I feel that I get help from (mindfulness), why on earth would I give up on it? (B7, 6-month follow-up interview)

> It can get very hectic, COVID-19 brought it up again … (Mindfulness) is a concrete tool that helps me remember: "How can I help myself?" (B7, 12-month follow-up interview)

Interviewees reported mindfulness to have helped them reflect on instances of experienced failure or discomfort. Many had realized that carrying the burden of every negative situation negatively influenced their well-being, such as sleep quality. *Accepting one's struggles* signifies changing one's perspective and gaining objectivity. Ruminating over past events had decreased as the leaders learned to accept struggles as part of life every human being must face. Another major theme for the leaders was *letting go of self-criticism*, which entails moving away from self-accusation, perfectionism, and negative self-talk. Many described their self-created imaginary pressures or pressures caused by the environment, and how mindfulness learning had helped in the mental work toward a more understanding way to guide oneself. Many said the process involved the realization that one is enough. Then, it was relieving to give oneself some "leash". Many had *adopted a grateful attitude*, which manifested as appreciation toward life. Some cherished their re-discovered values, rooted in valuing oneself. The perceived benefits of mindfulness practice, like taking breathing breaks, motivated the leaders to continue practicing.

Self-caring Self-caring refers to acting self-compassionately, i.e., the behavioral aspects of self-oriented compassion. Many interviewees described how an increased awareness and the development of self-compassionate insight drove their personal self-care practices.

According to our interviewees, self-compassion encompasses several areas of life. *Establishing healthy habits* entails practices that the leaders viewed as choices that can promote their health and well-being, such as physical exercise, sleeping routines, eating, and

mindfulness practice. Connecting the rationale to mindfulness learning, one interviewee said they had "given oneself the permission" to take a few hours weekly for physical exercise, even if it meant they would go to work a few hours later that day. *Managing work tasks with awareness* was viewed as a self-care practice. Many leaders discussed their problematic habits of multitasking, and how mindfulness had helped them become more aware of it. While working, the leaders now prioritized and attempted to pace their work tasks in a smarter way. Often, the leaders expressed that they tried not to think about work at all because they felt work took up a lot of space in their lives. *Detaching from work* signifies concrete actions to restrict working time, for instance by taking breaks. The leaders needed time to recover from work. Through mindfulness, many said they had achieved a better balance. This required conscious efforts to distance themselves from work and its high demands by drawing clearer boundaries, both toward work tasks and in relation to other people, as these quotes exemplify:

> One must take moments to calm down. … I must consciously do these (mindfulness) exercises. .... My mind is calmer, and I become more compassionate toward myself. ... I don't have to perform so much, and I have more time for myself, hobbies, and other relaxation ... For recovery. (C12, interview 1)

> At the office it is natural to do those conscious practices when I move from one place to another one, but here at the home office ... Our meetings should be 45 minutes long, not an hour so that a person has time to recover in between. ... Taking care of my coping when working from home is … something to tackle. (C12, 6-month follow-up interview)

> (Mindfulness) is part of my day-to-day. The last time was today when I thought that I am so busy, the list of undone work tasks is growing, now, I must take a moment and stretch and breathe ... One must lead one's own work and take micro-breaks throughout the day. (C12, 12-month follow-up interview)

Other-oriented compassion

Other-oriented compassion involves showing compassion towards others and taking care of them.

Being compassionate toward others Being compassionate toward others refers to the capability to be compassionate toward other people. It entails the perceptional and affective aspects of other-oriented compassion.

Many viewed mindfulness training to have assisted in *taking a supportive and kind stance toward others.* Importantly, the development of a supportive and compassionate attitude appeared to encompass recognizing the leader's responsibility for the well-being of their employees and fostering a nurturing work environment. Many interviewed leaders explained that mindfulness helped them see the suffering around them more clearly. *Recognizing others' suffering* involves gaining a better understanding of struggles other people might face in their work and private lives. For the interviewees, better noticing and understanding other people's perspectives and thereby supporting them in performance-oriented work, seemed an indispensable leadership skill that mindfulness supported. The leaders also honed the workplace where individuals are being taken care of and respected for who they are and where they stand. The theme of *letting go of judgment* involves accepting others, and not trying to change people. Sometimes this attitude appeared to take the form of forgiveness. Many interviewees discussed their intentions to bring the practice of mindfulness to the workplace on a genuinely voluntary basis, demonstrating a nonjudgmental stance. For example, this leader emphasized that forcefully pushing team members to engage in mindfulness, or any other practice for that matter, would not yield positive results:

> (Mindfulness) doesn't have to be a thing that everybody should follow … They all have their own journeys, so it's something that you cannot impose on people ... Some are more easily onboard than others, and that's totally fine. (E1, interview 1)
>
> Everybody can decide what is relevant to them. That's part of the diversity story and the acceptance that we're all different, and if it doesn't work for you, then it doesn't work for you, no harm done. (E1, 6-month follow-up interview)
>
> Some (team) members are (keener) than others, but ... I have sort of let them be at this point … But every now and then, if it's a difficult situation, I will just say "Now, we just breathe a little and then we make a decision" ... I also find that you should leave people their own choices. (E1, 12-month follow-up interview)

Taking care of others Taking care of others means extending good deeds from self to others. Many of the interviewed leaders conveyed that with the help of mindfulness, they had become more aware of their behavior in their interactions with others.

Instances of *giving attention to others* represented being present in interactions. Leaders showed more interest in, and willingness to listen to others, and many told how they had

deliberately started giving space to their team members to express their views instead of imposing their own. The theme of *expressing oneself kindly* demonstrates a caring, respectful, open, and patient communication style. For this leader, mindfulness training had brought about a drastic change in their response to stressful situations, resulting in significant positive effects on their team over the course of one year:

> I was exploding a lot. And for me (mindfulness means) watching myself and my feelings, and not exploding. I try to … observe what's happening, and ... even if I could not …. stop myself when something happens, afterward I reflect on it ... Being more mindful … before doing something, saying something. (E4, interview 1)

> I must say (mindfulness) has really changed my life and my way of thinking. I more often tend to be in the observing position, be still. I also try to be calmer and not … fall back into my emotions and explode ... Just reminding myself to calm down, look from different angles, and be more patient. (E4, 6-month follow-up interview)

> I used to be the exploding (type)... and now I'm more down to earth and more listening. I just... take a deep breath. ... I got really bad feedback (before) ... from the team, that I am ... creating chaos … This time I got good feedback, so it changed something ... I changed how I handle stressful situations. (E4, 12-month follow-up interview)

Being a role model and leading by example was an important way for many leaders, and assisting others to care for their well-being and manage their work tasks were central forms of *helping others* for the leaders. Leaders educated team members by encouraging them to be more lenient with themselves, trying to help them better cope with their workloads. The majority aspired to bring mindfulness learning to their teams as a concrete tool that they viewed could support many employees. Others found bringing mindfulness to their teams to be challenging because of prejudices or not knowing how, for instance, while some leaders carefully considered the smartest way to introduce mindfulness to their teams.

Co-active compassion

Co-active compassion entails how leaders sense and engage with their individual team members to co-develop compassion.

Sensing interconnectedness The growing sense of interconnectedness appeared as a crucial factor fueling leaders' compassionate perceptions and actions. Often, leaders who felt a growing sense of interconnectedness because of mindfulness expressed strongly how they had begun to understand that their leadership had an influence on their followers.

A prevailing theme among the interviewed leaders was that effective leadership depends upon one's capacity to successfully *lead oneself first*, exemplifying the timeless saying of putting the air mask on one's own face first. Numerous individuals expressed the perspective that self-caring has the potential to profoundly impact relationships in a positive manner. Overall, the leaders commonly linked mindfulness with the incorporation of softer values within the workplace. Many believed that providing mindfulness training for leaders and general employees alike emphasizes the significance of fostering prosocial interactions among individuals. First and foremost, they recognized how practicing mindfulness was key in *facilitating perspective-taking* at the workplace, as it had increased their own understanding that everyone around them experienced their own challenges. In general, the interviewees recognized that cultivating present-moment awareness, a key takeaway from mindfulness training, formed the foundation for everyone's capacity to engage with others in a mutually beneficial manner. This leader, for instance, articulated that mindfulness as a shared resource plays a pivotal role in fostering egoless behavior:

> The more aware and present you are, the less identified you become with your own ego, and the less concerned you are about being right … Being more present allows you to accurately assess the situation, respond appropriately, and provide proper guidance to the group … Just like you take time for dental hygiene, you should also make time for your mind because you interact with others when you engage with the outside world. (E1, interview 1)

Receiving support in return Ultimately, the investment of time and effort in self-caring and caring for others yields significant returns, as leaders begin to witness support from those around them. The reciprocity of prosocial behavior becomes apparent, reinforcing the value of prioritizing personal well-being and extending compassion to others.

Many interviewed leaders had experienced reciprocation. Upon adopting improved behavior towards others, they began to witness *responsiveness*. For instance, inspired by profound insights gained from mindfulness training, one leader embraced a new approach of showing genuine interest in their team members by asking them questions. Initially, this change caught the team off guard, but as time went on, they began to recognize the value in

their leader's inquiries, particularly when it came to investigating potential issues between teams. This quote exemplifies how rewarding it was to finally sense the team members' engagement, as a result of the leader's effort to be more present and caring:

> At first, they were critical and didn't know what I want from them. But I kept on asking, and they (started) thinking about (what I had asked), coming later to me, like 'yeah maybe you were right, maybe we can ask if something happened here in our customer service center between the teams' … Now I am taking time for them, (and) they are coming with questions … that was really the best outcome of mindfulness for me as a team leader. (E4, interview 1)

Recognizing the potential of mindfulness training for healthy workplace relationships, they acknowledged the significance of being attuned to the emotional climate or "pulse" of their team. These leaders viewed mindfulness to offer valuable tools and inspiration for *sharing and mutual support*. Creating trust and fostering a sense of safety within their teams emerged as a top priority for several interviewed leaders. The leaders seemed to have come to the intuitive understanding that they needed to lead by example and first share their own emotions genuinely. For many, this also meant sharing one's vulnerabilities and personal matters with team members to help build mutual trust. One leader exemplified the transformative impact of mindfulness training by acknowledging how they had surpassed their own expectations in terms of sharing personal experiences that they would have previously kept to themselves in a work setting. Authenticity and sharing experiences of suffering openly can undoubtedly foster trust, reciprocation, and connections among individuals, as this leader's example illustrates:

> I shared my story with my team members … I talked about many things, even delving into my personal life … Afterward, I noticed that it was easy to continue the conversation, as others started sharing things about themselves as well. That's how trust started to build right from the start. (D2, interview 1)

However, sharing also entails the vulnerability of potentially getting hurt. The same leader's other kind of experience vividly illustrates the delicate nature of vulnerability and trust at the workplace:

> This case (with) a new colleague … who was the type that never shows weakness. When I shared my story, (they) commented: "Well, some people are just weaker." It was very harsh … I immediately withdrew … I showed vulnerability, and they just took advantage of it. After that, I didn't have any trust in them. (D2, interview 1)

The interviews revealed a clear realization that integrating mindfulness principles in the workplace can profoundly impact organizational dynamics and benefit employees on several organizational layers if team leaders learned to be more mindful. Importantly, numerous interviewees expressed their belief that the prosocial attitudes and behaviors fostered through mindfulness training have the potential to spread contagiously within the organization, resulting in *positive mood contagion*. At the same time, there was a recognition that mindfulness could not be imposed on individuals, as employees need to have the autonomy to choose whether they want to engage in such potentially transformative practices. In a similar vein, some leaders voiced their preference to keep mindfulness as a private resource, solely for their personal use. However, it was acknowledged that one can cultivate mindfulness informally in many ways, including setting an example, without strictly adhering to formal mindfulness practices.

Discussion

Suffering in organizations is real (Wee et al., 2017), and leaders no doubt play a key role in alleviating organizational suffering (Wee and Fehr, 2021). This study offers insights into how mindfulness-trained leaders demonstrate a compassionate mindset and compassionate action in relation to themselves and others, and how compassion is co-developed in organizations. Our findings have shown that integrated into day-to-day through informal mindfulness practices (Kabat-Zinn, 2011), such as dedicating more recovery time to themselves, leaders can actualize the self-compassionate mindset (Self-oriented compassion). The interviewed leaders also explained how they perceived their mindfulness learning and practice to benefit their leadership relationships, as they extend their enhanced compassion toward team members through concrete actions, for instance by actively helping others to alleviate their suffering (Other-oriented compassion). Our findings underline the necessity of both self- and other-oriented compassion for leaders. While the leaders in this study generally

acknowledged the significance of empathizing with others' emotions and the importance of developing the ability to recognize and understand their suffering, many emphasized that it was the leader's duty to observe and acknowledge the employees' despair without becoming engulfed in it but rather to protect oneself. Furthermore, our findings reveal how compassionate leaders perceive reciprocation (Co-active compassion).

Drawing on the findings, we developed a model of how mindfulness interventions foster compassionate leadership development at the individual and collective levels within organizational settings. The model shows both perceptual and behavioral elements, and the mechanisms that propel such elements to foster the emergence of compassionate leadership across individual and collective levels in work organizations. We present the model in Figure 2 and discuss its core attributes.

- -

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

- -

Figure 2 shows that at the individual level, *mindful noticing* helps bring leader self-oriented compassion to the forefront. Leader mindfulness training activates the mechanism of mindful noticing—which defines awareness and noticing the need for- and details of doing- self compassion—whereby individual leaders recognize the need for and engage in addressing suffering in the organization. Specifically, they begin to notice their own experience, which leads to self-compassion ('being') and self-care ('doing'). At the collective level, first, *inter-connecting* helps generate other-oriented compassion. Inter-connecting is a mechanism that describes how self-oriented compassion leads to other-oriented compassion, wherein self-compassion (at a lower level) connects upward on a collective level in the form of leaders being more compassionate toward others while also engaging in compassionate action of

taking care of others. Second, at the collective level, *co-occurring* helps elevate compassion to co-active compassion. Co-occurring, as a mechanism, elucidates how leaders' compassionate intentions and behaviors overlap with followers, who simultaneously experience the former's compassionate behaviors enacted, and in turn reciprocate and replicate them in the community. Our study shows that as leaders elevate their compassion to engage the collective level beyond other-oriented compassion, the mechanism of co-occurring activates co-active compassion, which manifests in the form of sensing interconnectedness and receiving support in return among leaders and their followers.

To clarify the value of *co-active compassion* derived from self- and other-oriented compassion among leaders and their team members in work organizations, we borrowed the idea of a co-active process from Myers's (2018) work, which explained the power of "a discursive learning process where individuals (i.e., a model and learner) intentionally share and jointly process a model's work experience(s) in interpersonal interactions to co-construct an emergent, situated understanding of the experience(s)" (pp. 613-14). Co-active compassion describes a discursive mindful self- and other-oriented compassion learning process where the leader blends self-care and the care for others while discharging their responsibilities and thereby enhance not only reciprocal engagement of other team members toward compassion in the organization but, more crucially, to also embrace a deep awareness of compassionate leadership development effectiveness. This co-activeness lies in the interactional dynamics between a leader and his/her team members and unveiled through mechanisms, such as a sensing interconnectedness (e.g., perspective-taking) and getting support in return (e.g., mutual support). Our findings underscore how this process operates on both perceptual and behavioral levels as leaders interact with team members, fostering a sense of interconnectedness and receiving support in return for their compassionate attitudes and behaviors toward others. The participants of this study discovered firsthand how

compassion can be collectively developed within their teams (Madden et al., 2012; Wee and Fehr, 2021).

Next, we discuss the contribution of our findings to the literature on mindfulness and compassion in the organizational leadership context.

Theoretical contributions

Our study makes contributions to theory and research. First, the literature on compassion in organizations (Dutton et al., 2006; Lilius et al., 2011) is enhanced by the reciprocal interplay we observed between self- and other-oriented compassion toward compassionate leadership development. In view of current extreme conditions that confront modern work organizations (e.g., Oruh eHE t al., 2021; Trougakos et al., 2020), understanding how perceptual and behavioral processes and mechanisms of self- and other-oriented compassion affect our knowledge of compassionate leadership development as a vital competence is both timely and significant. We underscore the reciprocal nature of the phenomenon through a co-activation process of self- and other-oriented compassion we termed *co-active compassion*. It is a co-development process through active interaction between self- and other-oriented compassion applied by a leader and his/her team members, whereby the leader gives compassion and receives in return from team members. Prior research shows that both self- and other-oriented compassion are linked to mindfulness (e.g., Fulton, 2018). We expand this linkage using a longitudinal mindfulness intervention approach to unveil the co-activation process through which self- and other-oriented compassion intermingled to manifest compassion competence for leadership.

Second, our study identifies key mechanisms of co-active compassion as a collective level phenomenon that is developed through perceptual and behavioral elements—*sensing of interconnectedness* (leading oneself first; facilitating perspective-taking) and *receiving support in return* (responsiveness; sharing and mutual support; contagion of positive mood).

Subscribing to the team-level behavioral discourse (Ehrhart and Naumann, 2004; Sessions et al., 2020), Wee and Fehr (2021, p. 1807) suggest that "team compassion behavior is likely to emerge through a bottom-up process in which two or more members demonstrate compassionate actions that are directed at addressing suffering of another member in the group." Our study not only joins this bottom-up process (Wee and Fehr, 2021) but also expands it to the leadership (competence) development context, which epitomizes a top-down process, even though compassion science pays little attention to formal boundaries (Shuck et al., 2019). Moreover, research shows that while conceptual understanding of the transformative power of compassion abounds in the work setting, previous empirical evidence of its connection to leadership is still limited (Shuck et al., 2019). Therefore, this contribution also addresses this gap by not only situating the qualitative mindfulness-intervention work on compassion within the organizational leadership domain, but also demonstrating how unique underlying perceptual and behavioral elements of co-active compassion manifest over time at the collective-level. The notion of co-active compassion also fits the idea of leadership development as a dynamic social influence process (Day and Antonakis, 2013).

Third, as a unique contribution, this longitudinal research indicates that mindfulness can support establishing and maintaining self-compassionate practices in the long term. In other words, we inform the self-compassion literature (Neff, 2012; Quaglia et al., 2021) through a mindfulness intervention approach that illuminates mindfulness as a transformative change agent (we do not show growth in our case) that helps sustain/maintain change in the long term. This contribution is significant from the viewpoint of the employed methodological design, given that self-report measures dominate research on self-compassion and hence consistent with the increasing calls for experimental methods to examine it (Neff, 2022).

Practical implications

Our study reveals that compassion is a relevant area of development for leaders who participate in mindfulness training, as it encompasses multiple areas of leadership work. Allowing oneself kindness and self-caring, a leader enables better coping and leadership of others and cultivates a healthy working environment. The findings of this study bear relevance to organizations and employees alike. First, our study discussed compassion as a modern leadership competence, involving the awareness of self and others, the ability to show one's authentic self at work more boldly, inquiry work, and engaging in genuinely caring actions (Worline and Dutton, 2017). When employees feel that leaders attend to their emotions, support them, and show care about them as human beings, not just resources, they will be more engaged, adaptive, collaborative, and innovative. Second, a key insight from this study is that compassion can be developed in organizations through several mechanisms. To make compassion more accessible and to include it in regular training offerings organizations offer for their employees, organizations should treat compassion in organizations as a competence that can be developed (Worline and Dutton, 2017). There are resources and services available to assist with the process (centerformsc.org; ccare.stanford.edu). As compassion is an integral part of mindfulness and mindfulness interventions, HR and development professionals may dispense information from the empirical research on mindfulness training related to self-kindness, a sense of common humanity, and awareness and acceptance of self and others (Neff, 2009).

Limitations and future research

We conducted a comprehensive analysis of mindfulness training at four time points and meticulously selected representative examples of data. Alongside our methodological contribution, we established qualitative rigor and trustworthiness through the systematic planning and organization of the entire research project throughout the design, intervention

delivery, data collection, data analysis, and reporting phases, and through the data triangulation by deploying multiple data sources and types (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015).

We also acknowledge some limitations. Based on our findings, we suggest multiple directions for future research. First, our primary data (i.e., the managers and supervisors who participated in the study) is from Europeans who live in the most developed parts of Western Europe. We recommend data from other participants outside Europe including emerging and developing country leaders in the future. In addition, given the context deficit in leadership research (Johns, 2023), we recommend examining the dynamics of compassion in the growing extreme and polarized cultural, political contexts within which work is performed and leaders are expected to be different in- and through their work (Shuck et al., 2019). Second, our data is female-dominated. However, it fits the study of self-compassion, given prior research suggests that women tend to be slightly harsher towards themselves than their male counterparts (Yarnell et al., 2015), which could leave female leaders disadvantaged in this regard. Nonetheless, we recommend male-dominated data in the future to compare our study. Such an approach may also help clarify whether compassion, particularly self-compassion, is gendered. Third, we collected a large multi-wave data set of qualitative materials with, but it does not allow for statistical generalizability or second- or third-person perspectives. To facilitate gaining a comprehensive understanding of the issues studies, we encourage the use of innovative mixed-method and multi-perspective approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative methods, such as experiments with wearables, diary studies and interventions studies including quantitative multi-step follow-up procedures (Urrila, 2022).

Conclusions

This study has made significant strides in understanding the role of mindfulness and compassion in organizational leadership. The insights gleaned from mindfulness-trained

leaders reveal that a compassionate mindset and actions, both self-oriented and other-oriented, play a pivotal role in alleviating suffering within organizations. Our findings underscore the importance of integrating informal mindfulness practices into daily leadership routines, enhancing leaders' ability to cultivate compassion both for themselves and their team members.

A key theoretical contribution of this research lies in the reciprocal interplay observed between self- and other-oriented compassion, which fosters the development of compassionate leadership. In the face of modern organizational challenges, understanding how these two forms of compassion co-activate and intermingle to create a compassionate leadership capability is both timely and significant. This study expands upon existing literature by illustrating the co-activation process of compassion through a longitudinal mindfulness intervention approach.

Additionally, our research sheds light on the mechanisms of co-active compassion at the collective level, emphasizing the interconnectedness and mutual support within teams. This aligns with and expands upon existing theories, suggesting that team compassion behavior emerges from a bottom-up process complemented by a top-down approach from leadership. This insight fills a gap in current research by demonstrating the empirical connection between compassion and leadership, a link that has been conceptually acknowledged but not extensively evidenced.

Finally, our study offers a unique perspective on the long-term benefits of mindfulness in fostering and maintaining self-compassionate practices. This finding contributes to the self-compassion literature by highlighting mindfulness as a transformative agent for long-term change. The methodological design of this study, moving beyond self-report measures, responds to the growing call for qualitative and longitudinal intervention approaches in examining the development of leadership competencies.

This study not only contributes to academic discourse but also offers practical implications for developing compassionate leadership in organizations. In conclusion, our research provides a comprehensive understanding of how mindfulness and compassion can be effectively integrated into leadership practices, thereby enhancing the well-being of both leaders and their team members.

References

Abendroth, M. 2011. Compassion fatigue: Caregivers at risk. *The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*, 16 (1), 10.3912/OJIN.Vol16No01OS01

Bluth, K., & Neff, K. D. 2018. New frontiers in understanding the benefits of self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 17:6, 605-608, DOI: 10.1080/15298868.2018.1508494

Bluth, K., Gaylord, S. A., Campo, R. A., Mullarkey, M., & Hobbs, L. 2016. Making friends with yourself: A mixed methods pilot study of a mindful self-compassion program for adolescents. *Mindfulness*, 7(2), 479-492.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2*) 77-101.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. 2012. Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology*: Vol. 2. Research Designs (pp. 57-91) Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. 2003. The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 84 (4) (2003), pp. 822-848.

Butterfield, K. D., Cook, W., Liberman, N., & Goodstein, J. 2023. Self-repair in the workplace: A qualitative investigation. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 182: 231-340.

Condon, P., Desbordes, G., Miller, W. B., & DeSteno, D. 2013. Meditation increases compassionate responses to suffering. *Psychological Science,* 24(10): 2125-2127.

Day, D. V., & Antonakis, J. 2013. The future of leadership. *The Wiley-Blackwell handbook of the psychology of leadership, change, and organizational development* (pp. 221-235).

Dane, E., & Brummel, B.J. 2014. Examining workplace mindfulness and its relations to job performance and turnover intention. *Human Relations*, 67/1): 1-128.

Desbordes, G., Negi, L. T., Pace, T. W., Wallace, A. B., Raison, C. L., & Schwartz, E. L. 2013. Effects of mindful-attention and compassion meditation training on amygdala response to emotional stimuli in an ordinary, non-meditative state. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*. doi:10.3389/fnhum.2012.00292

Dodson, S. J., & Heng, Y. T. 2022. Self-compassion in organizations: A review and future research agenda. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 43(2), 168-196.

Donald J. N., Sahdra, B. K., Van Zanden, B., Duineveld, J., Atkins, P. W. B., Marshall, S. L. & Ciarrochi, J. 2019. Does your mindfulness benefit others? A systematic review and meta-analysis of the link between mindfulness and prosocial behaviour. *British Journal of Psychology* 110: 1, 101-125.

Donaldson-Feilder, E., Lewis, R., Yarker, J., & Whiley, L. A. (2022). Interpersonal mindfulness in leadership development. *Journal of Management Education, 46*(5), 816–852.

Duan, J., Zong, Z., Wang, X., Wang, T., & Li, P. 2023. Leverage self- and other-compassion to prevent the abuse trickle-down. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 44(9): 1419-1435.

Ehrhart, M. G., & Naumann, S. E. 2004. Organizational citizenship behavior in work groups: A group norms approach. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89(6), 960-974.

Fredrickson, B. L., Cohn, M. A., Coffey, K. A., Pek, J. & Finkel, S. M. 2008. Open hearts build lives: Positive emotions, induced through loving-kindness meditation, build consequential personal resources. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95: 5, 1045-1062.

Frost, P. J. 2003. Toxic emotions at work: How compassionate managers handle pain and conflict. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Fulton, C. L. 2018. Self-compassion as a mediator of mindfulness and compassion for others. *Counseling and Values, 63*(1), 45-56.

Galante, J., Galante, I., Bekkers. M.-J., & Gallacher, J. 2014. Effect of kindness-based meditation on health and well-being: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 82(6): 1101-1114.

Gilbert, E., Foulk, T., & Bono, J. (2018). Building personal resources through interventions: An integrative review. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *39*, 214–228.

Goetz, J. L., Keltner, D., & Simon-Thomas, E. 2010. Compassion: An evolutionary analysis and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin, 136*(3), 351–374.

Good, D. J., Lyddy, C. J., Glomb, T. M., Bono, J. E., Brown, K. W., Duffy, M. K., Baer, R. A., Brewer, J. A. & Lazar, S. W. (2016). Contemplating mindfulness at work: An integrative review. *Journal of Management*, 42(1), 114–142.

Guest, D., Knox, A., & Warhurst, C. (2022). Humanizing work in the digital age: Lessons from socio-technical systems and quality of working life initiatives. *Human Relations*, 75(8), 1461-1482.

Heaphy, E., Lilius, J., & Feldman, E. (2022). Moved to speak up: How prosocial emotions influence the employee voice process. *Human Relations*, 75(6), 1113-1139.

Jazaieri, H., Jinpa, G. T., McGonigal, K., Rosenberg, E. l., Finkelstein, J., Simon-Thomas, E., ... Goldin, P. R. 2013. Enhancing compassion: A randomized controlled trial of a compassion cultivation training program. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 14, 1113-1129.

Jennings, R. E., Lanaj, K., & Kim, Y. J. 2023. Self-compassion at work: A self-regulation perspective on its beneficial effects for work performance and wellbeing. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

Johns, G. 2023. The context deficit in leadership research. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 101755. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2023.101755

Kabat-Zinn, J. 2003. Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice,* 10(2): 144-156.

Kabat-Zinn, J. 2011. Some reflections on the origins of MBSR, skillful means, and the trouble with maps. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12(1), 281-306.

Karremans, J. C., Van Schie, H. T., Van Dongen, I., Kappen, G., Mori, G., Van As, S., Ten Bokkel, I. M., & Van der Wal, R. C. 2020. Is mindfulness associated with interpersonal forgiveness? *Emotion,* 20: 2, 296-310.

Kirby, J. N., Tellegen, C. L., & Steindl, S. R. 2017. A meta-analysis of compassion-based interventions: Current state of knowledge and future directions. *Behavior Therapy*, *48*(6), 778-792.

Kudesia, R. S., Pandey, A., & Reina, C. S. (2022). Doing More With Less: Interactive Effects of Cognitive Resources and Mindfulness Training in Coping With Mental Fatigue From Multitasking. *Journal of Management*, 48(2), 410-439.

Lambert, B., Caza, B.B., Trinh, E., & Ashford, S. 2022. Individual-centered interventions: Identifying what, how, and why interventions work in organizational contexts. *Academy of Management Annals*, 16(2): 508-546.

Lanaj, K., Jennings, R. E., Ashford, S. J., & Krishnan, S. 2022. When leader self-care begets other care: Leader role self-compassion and helping at work. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *107*(9), 1543.

Lefebvre, J. I., Montani, F., & Courcy, F. 2020. Self-compassion and resilience at work: A practice-oriented review. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, *22*(4), 437-452.

Lewis, A. B., & Ebbeck, V. 2014. Mindful and self-compassionate leadership development: Preliminary discussions with wildland fire managers. *Journal of Forestry*, 112(2), 230-236.

Yarnell, M. L., Neff, K. D., Davidson, O. A., & Mullarkey, M. 2019. Gender differences in self-compassion: Examining the role of gender role orientation. *Mindfulness*. 10:1136-1152

Madden, L. T., Duchon, D., Madden, T. M., & Plowman, D. A. 2012. Emergent organizational capacity for compassion. *Academy of Management Journal*, 37, 689-708.

McCracken, L. M., & Yang, S. Y. 2008. A contextual cognitive-behavioral analysis of rehabilitation workers' health and well-being: Influences of acceptance, mindfulness, and values-based action. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, *53*(4), 479.

Murray, S.A., Kendall, M., Carduff, E., Worth, A., Harris, F.M., Lloyd, A., … Sheikh, A. 2009. Use of serial qualitative interviews to understand patients' evolving experiences and needs. *BMJ*, 339:b3702. doi:10.1136/bmj.b3702.

Myers, Christopher G. 2018. "Coactive Vicarious Learning: Toward a Relational Theory of Vicarious Learning in Organizations." *Academy of Management Review*, *43*(4): 610–34.

Neff, K. D. 2003. Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity*, 2, 85-102.

Neff, K. 2004. Self-compassion and psychological well-being. *Constructivism in the human sciences*, *9*(2), 27.

Neff, K. D. 2009. The role of self-compassion in development: A healthier way to relate to oneself. *Human Development*, 52(4): 211-214.

Neff, K. D. 2012. The science of self-compassion. In C. Germer & R. Siegel (Eds.), *Compassion and wisdom in psychotherapy* (pp. 79–92). Guilford Press

Neff, K. D. 2023. Self-compassion: Theory, method, research, and intervention. *Annual Review of Psychology, 74*, 193-218.

Ni, D., Zheng, X., & Liang, L. H. (2023). How and when leader mindfulness influences team member interpersonal behavior: Evidence from a quasi-field experiment and a field survey. *Human Relations*, 76(12), 1940-1965.

Nicklin, J. M., Shockley, K. M., & Dodd, H. P. 2022. Self-compassion: Implications for work-family conflict and balance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 138: 103785.

Oruh, E. S., Mordi, C., Dibia, C. H., & Ajonbadi, H. A. 2021. Exploring compassionate managerial leadership style in reducing employee stress level during COVID-19 crisis: the case of Nigeria. *Employee Relations: The International Journal*, *43*(6), 1362-1381.

Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. 1997. An introduction to scientific realist evaluation. In E. Chelimsky & W. R. Shadish (Eds.), *Evaluation for the 21st century: A handbook* (pp. 405–418). Sage Publications, Inc.

Quaglia, J. T., Soisson, A., & Simmer-Brown, J. 2021. Compassion for self-versus other: A critical review of compassion training research. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *16*(5), 675-690.

Ramachandran, S., Balasubramanian, S., James, W. F., & Al Masaeid, T. 2023. Whither compassionate leadership? A systematic review. *Management Review Quarterly*, 1-85.

Schabram, K., & Heng, Y. T. 2022. How other- and self-compassion reduce burnout through resource replenishment. *Academy of Management Journal*, 65(2), 453-478.

Sessions, H., Nahrgang, J. D., Newton, D. W., & Chamberlin, M. 2020. I'm tired of listening: The effects of supervisor appraisals of group voice on supervisor emotional exhaustion and performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105(6), 619–636.

Shuck, B., Alagaraja, M., Immekus, J., Cumberland, D., & Honeycutt-Elliott, M. 2019. Does compassion matter in leadership? A two-stage sequential equal status mixed method exploratory study of compassionate leader behavior and connections to performance in human resource development. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, *30*(4), 537-564

Skoranski A., Coatsworth, J. D., & Lunkenheimer, E. 2019. A dynamic systems approach to understanding mindfulness in interpersonal relationships. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28: 2659-2672.

Sprang, G., Clark, J. J., & Whitt-Woosley, A. 2007. Compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction, and burnout: Factors impacting a professional's quality of life. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 12(3), 259-280.

Strauss, C., Taylor, B. L., Gu, J., Kuyken, W., Baer, R., Jones, F., & Cavanagh, K. 2016. What is compassion and how can we measure it? A review of definitions and measures. *Clinical Psychology Review, 47*, 15-27.

Trougakos, J. P., Chawla, N., & McCarthy, J. M. 2020. Working in a pandemic: Exploring the impact of COVID-19 health anxiety on work, family, and health outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105(11), 1234-1245.

Urrila, L. I. 2022. From personal wellbeing to relationships: A systematic review on the impact of mindfulness interventions and practices on leaders. *Human Resource Management Review*, 32(3), 100837.

Urrila, L. I., & Mäkelä, L. 2022. Be(com)ing other-oriented: Mindfulness-trained leaders' experiences of their enhanced social awareness. *Management Learning*, *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076221136923

van Knippenberg, D., & Dwertmann, D. J. G. (2022). Interacting Elements of Leadership: Key to Integration But Looking for Integrative Theory. *Journal of Management*, 48(6), 1695-1723.

Waldron A. L., & Ebbeck V. 2015. The relationship of mindfulness and self-compassion to desired wildland fire leadership. *International Journal of Wildland Fire*, 24(2), 201-211.

Warren, E., Melendez-Torres, G. J., Viner, R., & Bonell, C. 2020. Using qualitative research to explore intervention mechanisms: findings from the trial of the Learning Together whole-school health intervention. *Trials*, *21*(1), 774.

Wee, E. X. M., Liao, H., Liu, D., & Liu, J. 2017. Moving from abuse to reconciliation: A power-dependence perspective on when and how a follower can break the spiral of abuse. *Academy of Management Journal*, 60(6), 2352–2380.

Wee, E. X., & Fehr, R. 2021. Compassion during difficult times: Team compassion behavior, suffering, supervisory dependence, and employee voice during COVID-19. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *106*(12), 1805.

Weng, H. Y., Fox, A. S., Shackman, A. J., Stodola, D. E., Caldwell, J. Z. K., Olson, M. C., ... Davidson, R. J. 2013. Compassion training alters altruism and neural responses to suffering. *Psychological Science*, 24, 1171-1180.

Worline M. C. & Dutton, J. E. 2017. *Awakening Compassion at Work: The Quiet Power That Elevates People and Organizations*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Yarnell, L. M., Stafford, E. E., Neff, K. D., Reilly, E. D., Knox, M. C., & Mullarkey, M. 2015. Meta-analysis of gender differences in self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 14:5, 499-520.

Table 1. Themes and examples from the data

Main themes	Sub-themes	i. Post-intervention interviews	ii. 6-month follow-up interviews	iii. 12-month follow-up interviews
Self-oriented compassion				
Being self-compassionate	Taking a supportive and kind stance toward oneself; Accepting one's struggles; Letting go of self-criticism; Adopting a grateful attitude	I can ignore the storming thoughts about what I cannot (influence) ... The situation is what it is, and I try to just be and live with it … Certainly, I am calmer and I don't try to overcome too big obstacles even when there is pressure to do so. (B18, Interview 1)	(I) stay calm even when (I) face adversities. It can be oral, or facial expressions … something that would have, before, stiffened me and totally ruined my day or week, or month … Now I'm just: "Okay. Now this." … This has been very healing for me, that I can overcome and accept it … I don't let it take my resources. (B18, 6-month follow-up)	I can question my own thoughts … I don't go over these negative thoughts in my head which do not serve me in that situation. … Anxiety has gone away altogether through mindfulness, I don't get anxious on that same scale anymore, like before this (mindfulness) course. (B18, 12-month follow-up)
		I am so compassionate toward others … too understanding even … I am the type that punishes myself enormously and demands so much from myself, clearly more than from anyone else. ... This was somehow the biggest realization in the training: Could I be more lenient toward myself? (B12, interview 1)	Before, I used to always think: "Is it me?" Did I do something wrong?" ... Now I am like, "I know how this is", and I think that it is not my problem, nor caused by me. (B12, 6-month follow-up)	I think a lot more often that I can give myself mercy and somehow make it easier for myself and think that not all the mistakes in the world are caused by me. This is one thing that (the mindfulness course) made me actively consider. (B12, 12-month follow-up)
		I am more aware of my surroundings, and more present in the moment. I feel in control, even when it's a hassle ... (Mindfulness) has made me think about life and the quality of life. ... It is easier to find the positive things in the day. (C14, interview 1)	(Mindfulness) will be part of my journey, from a selfish perspective … There is so much a person can do for themselves and for their well-being. Taking a moment to calm down and focus opens your eyes to life … The fog has disappeared. (C14, 6-month follow-up)	I wouldn't be operational without mindfulness ... (It) has brought a better quality of life ... I learned to calm down and the avoid major anxiety when it's about to hit me ... A journey is still ahead of me, but (there's) a certain kind of balance now, and I'm a lot nicer person than a year ago. (C14, 12-month follow-up)
Self-caring	Establishing healthy habits; Managing work tasks with awareness; Detaching from work	How calm you are, for instance, defines how the day goes. ... I connect it to the fact that I have done (mindfulness) practices, especially the calming ones, before going to bed ... I keep waking up less in the middle of the night. (C15, interview 1)	I do expect (mindfulness) will be helpful in situations when I would again have problems falling asleep, or I wouldn't have control over things that go over in my mind … I see (mindfulness) as a toolset, a survival pack. (C15, 6-month follow-up)	(Mindfulness) techniques have clearly helped ... in situations when I can't fall (asleep) when some work-related matters or other things go over in my mind, so, with mindfulness techniques, I can calm my mind down so that I can fall asleep. (C15, 12-month follow-up)
		(Mindfulness) gives structure: "Now I need to focus on this (task)". Like, I have 10 people in my team and the days include a lot of hassle, people come and go, and the phone rings and emails come in, so it does help to close the door, then I can focus better. (E8, interview 1)	I still (multitask) but I've learned to pay attention to it: "Hey (name), now do this one thing, then move to the next one." It is useless to write an email, be on a call, and do a third thing (all at once). (E8, 6-month follow-up)	Some (meetings) need my input but some I can only listen to. I am a restless soul, so sometimes I knit ... I feel like I must do something, and that I can do ... Knitting is mindfulness, too. (E8, 12-month follow-up)
Other-oriented compassion				
Being compassionate toward others	Taking a supportive and kind stance toward others;	The thing that every person deserves is attention. That's also what I took out of the	I'm more aware if I'm not mindful … Sometimes I would just … scream back …	One thing that I changed is that I also try now to pay more attention to the speaker

	Recognizing others' suffering and challenges; Letting go of judgment	(mindfulness) course. … When I'm aggressive ... I try to notice that, and I don't want other people to suffer. (A7, interview 1)	(Now) I stay calm, I'm on the same level and I say: "I understand your concern, but now let's talk about the real issue." (A7, 6-month follow-up)	when there's a presentation or in a meeting, I think the guy on the other side deserves that I pay attention. That definitely changed ... I think that I am more aware of the moment I am in. (A7, 12-month follow-up)
		The experience of stress and burden is very individual. There are people who want to feel challenged and pressured all the time, while others feel the stress already when there are a few unanswered emails. So, we are all different and we must try to take the individual's perspective and think ... how to support that person. (E8, interview 1)	I have one team member who very easily gets into this panicky state. With (that person), I have often said "Let's breathe". In the beginning, they were like, no breathing can help. I said that it does help, in fact, … so put the mouse and pen down. Let's calm down and think it over. (E8, 6-month follow-up)	It is the supervisor's responsibility (to notice if someone is not well), even when the point is not to watch anyone. It's about seeing a person. Like, do they look like they're almost drowning under the workload. ... Really, if someone is falling. (E8, 12-month follow-up)
Taking care of others	Giving attention to others; Expressing oneself kindly and patiently; Helping others	I could truly be present for the staff, and they would sense that I am genuinely listening and fully engaged in the situation and their thoughts. I feel that sometimes... that I don't convey my presence to the staff, that I don't genuinely show it in those moments of interaction. (B11, interview 1)	Sometimes there is a lot of feedback, and various issues arise, so it's crucial to have the patience to listen to what others say and try to keep oneself calm. (B11, 6-month follow-up)	It's important to truly engage, show interest, and maybe approach those concerns with a different mindset ... I do have a way of creating a calm space for us, where I don't let others interrupt that moment, because I have made progress in that regard. (B11, 12-month follow-up)
		The biggest thing for me, something I also try to teach my team, is that regardless of the situation ... the only thing you have control over is your thoughts, and how you … choose to think about the situation. And if you choose to think in a particular way ... suddenly there are no problems. (E1, interview 1)	There are typically people that are ready and interested. Our approach (is) to start with those who are (more) interested and have voluntary sessions, and if people want to join, then they join (E1, 6-month follow-up)	Educating (is needed) first, but also giving them the space to do it … We also must be an example: "You must take a break, because you're not efficient otherwise" and nobody books any meetings at that time ... If we want to promote (mindfulness), we need to be allowing for those 5-10 minutes it takes. (E1, 12-month follow-up)
Co-active compassion				
Sensing interconnectedness	Leading oneself first; Facilitating perspective-taking	When one is able to calm their own inner landscape and life, they may have the energy to pause and contemplate others' matters as well … Improving one's own quality of life means gaining strength, reducing stress, and enhancing one's ability to function. In the process, perhaps I can be a slightly better person to someone else. (C14, interview 1)	(Mindfulness) has an impact on the quality of my life, and my well-being, which of course radiates to my family, my team, and everything (C14, 6-month follow-up)	(Mindfulness) has given me a way to influence my own consciousness, and that way interpret what is happening around me ... It is easier than before to evoke conversations about people's coping, results, meeting objectives ... I, kind of, start from myself, I clarify some things to myself ... And so, I can "channel" in a new way. It has given me more options for interaction. (C14, 12-month follow-up)
Receiving in return	Responsiveness; Sharing and mutual support; Contagion of positive mood	First, the person themself becomes happier. How you feel, you project to the outer world … it's coming back to you ... They were more taking into account others, the counterparts, they were listening better, and it all contributed to better discussions … I	It is enough to have one or two people in the team (who are mindful), and then the whole team is affected ... (They) contaminate the rest of the team with good vibes … (My team members) are more aware and more mindful ... with their own teams. In that sense	The more people we have in our teams who utilize (mindfulness) techniques, the more certain I am that the results will improve, and people will feel happier. I am still convinced of that. (E1, 12-month follow-up)

		have seen that (mindfulness) changes the dynamics for the better. (E1, interview 1)	… it has affected the organization in a positive way. (E1, 6-month follow-up)	

Figure 1. Intervention and data collection procedures

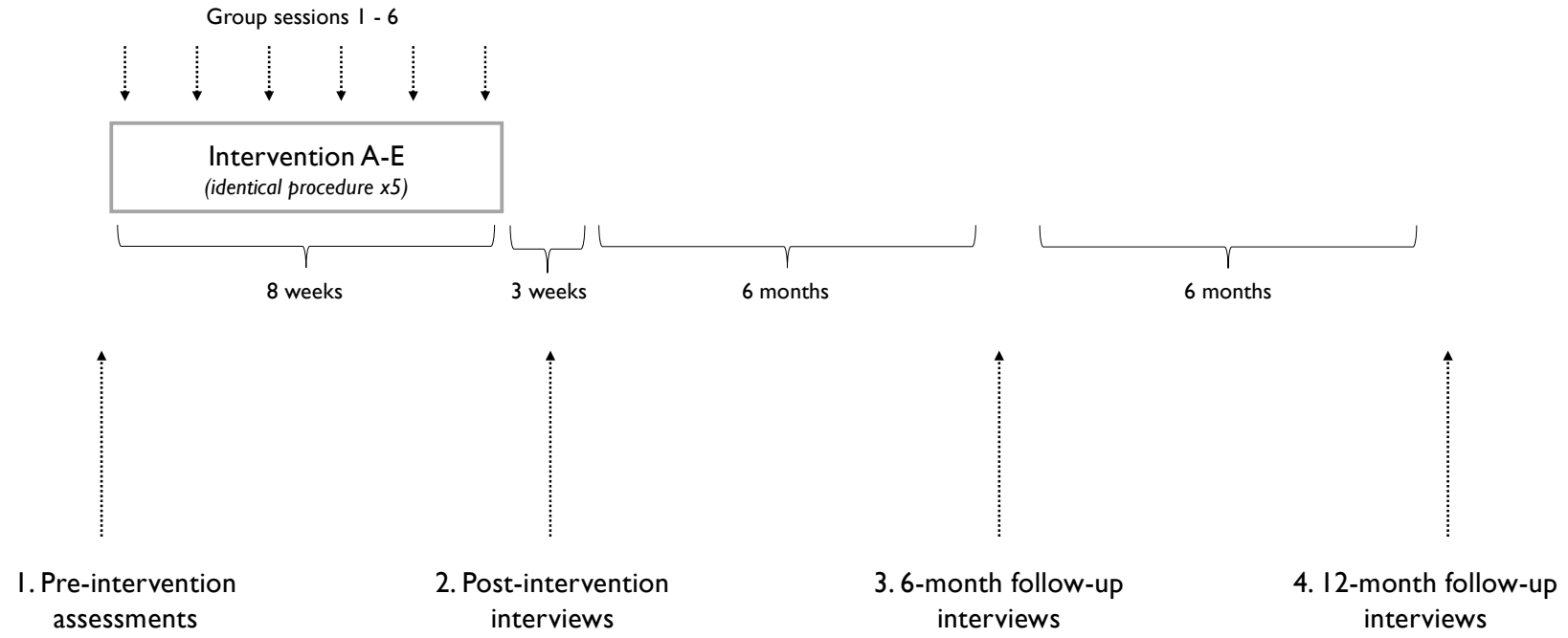

Figure 2. A model of compassionate leadership development through self-oriented, other-oriented and co-active compassion UPDATE