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By Michael Jenkins

In Singapore, we have seen many examples of altruism, compassion and empathy taking place during this challenging COVID-19 period. These ACE attributes, as I call them, are instances of humanity in action.

Friends of mine have spoken about simple acts ranging from over-tipping taxi drivers and hairdressers, through to volunteering and role-swapping, as seen with Singapore Airlines staff coming in to help as auxiliaries and guides at emergency medical facilities. At the corporate level, we know of companies handing back special COVID-19 government funding—the Jobs Support Scheme—with a request to civil servants to use the $35m for other positive purposes and outcomes. At times like these, in Singapore and elsewhere, we see the power of humanity coming to the fore.

I believe that if we learn to apply the principles of altruism, compassion and empathy in a sustainable manner, we can help reshape the post-COVID-19 world—one that will prosper again, for the benefit of all.

Companies can apply ACE concepts to underpin and strengthen a shared organisational purpose. In a recent blog, CEO of Unilever Alan Jope highlighted that purpose-driven companies are the ones that will continue to grow and thrive. During a global pandemic especially, he stressed the importance of "making sustainable living commonplace for the world's 8 billion people".

Putting purpose first—underpinned by values based on altruism, compassion and empathy—is the way forward. Concurrent with this approach, we need to ask ourselves these questions:

What are the lessons learned from living through the hardship wrought by COVID-19?

Are we seeing a rare opportunity to reshape corporate and organisational culture?

Can we get serious about purpose and make it stick? In other words, can we take concrete action instead of settling for nice, but empty words?

So what exactly do we mean by altruism, compassion and empathy?

Despite their nuances, people tend to associate each of these terms with "sympathy". In Chinese, we find a similar challenge: "compassion" and "sympathy", for example, are often rendered by the same characters: 同情 (tóng qíng), even though compassion and sympathy are quite different constructs. So, while sympathy is a valuable and important human attribute, sympathy alone is not enough in terms of what a society needs to move into the future. Sympathy just doesn't have sufficient action around it. This is why we need the combination of altruism, compassion and empathy.

Altruism

The term "altruism" was first coined by the French philosopher Auguste Comte as *altruisme*, which he used to describe the opposite of egoism. He formulated *altruisme* from the Italian word *altrui*, which in turn came from Latin *alteri*, meaning "other people", "others" or "someone else". Put in simple terms, altruism is the moral practice of concern for the happiness of other people and as such appears as a virtue in many cultures. It is also central to a number of world religions.

Among the many interesting aspects of altruism, the notion of what constitutes "others" can vary among different societies (and religions). That presents one of the first challenges for society: how can we strengthen altruism so that we can be altruistic to people who are not like us? It is therefore necessary for us to think of ways in which we can deliberately set out to meet people who are not like us and hear their stories.

However, this is easier said than done since many of us are quite happy to exist in our respective comfort zones of familiar faces and people. We tend to operate within a framework of "weak-tie networks" where we interact not just with people we know reasonably well—like co-workers or business acquaintances—but also with an often vast array of people we don't really "know" but who form parts of our personal landscapes, such as the security guard or the food court cleaners or the barista in our local coffeeshop.

These weak-tie networks are important to us from a neurological point of view. For instance, when our barista smiles as he recites our coffee order *before* we get a chance to place it (because he remembered us from our prior visits), this triggers a positive chemical reaction in our brains. The fact of us being recognised (by a person whose name we don't even know) reaffirms our place in the cosmos—that we exist— and contributes positively

to our mental well-being. Whether it's smiling at a stranger or saying good morning to a passer-by on the sidewalk, being altruistic is a simple act that costs nothing.

Altruism is an aspirational thing in many ways. Taken to the limit and it becomes synonymous with selflessness, the exact of opposite of selfishness. Though we are a long way from reaching that stage, we have something to aim for.

There's much to be gained by simply setting out on a journey towards becoming more altruistic. When you are gentle with an elderly person—by asking how they are today or by making a comment about the weather, or vacating your seat for them or seeing them safely across a busy street—you can be sure that what you are doing is way more than just being kind. You are also helping a person feel that they matter and that they aren't invisible. This is very important especially (but not only) for seniors: when people feel low or depressed, it is often because they feel like they have ceased to take up space in the universe—that they are somehow redundant and unnoticed by all around them. For this reason, it is critical to teach ourselves (and our children) that an act of generosity or kindness doesn't have to have any sort of payback. Altruistic behaviour should be actively encouraged as it might just save someone's life.

Compassion

When I started researching and investigating compassion around eight years ago, some colleagues (in a leadership development organisation in England) were singularly disinterested in the subject. One even said, "Michael, none of our clients are interested in compassion. None of them are asking for it."

But as a stubborn kind of person, I persisted, and weathered the ongoing criticism that compassion was something "fluffy" and "useless to organisations". Thanks to other like-minded co-workers, however, we began to make some progress in terms of our understanding of compassion, discovering along the way—and to our delight—that there were others around the world who were also taking a serious look at the role of compassion, particularly in the workplace setting.

The *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* offers a thought-provoking set of three major requirements for compassion to exist. People must:

- *Feel that the troubles evoking their feelings are serious*
- *Understand that sufferers' troubles are not self-inflicted*
- *Be able to picture themselves with the same problems, in a non-blaming and non-shaming manner*

Compassion is therefore about meeting people where they are, without judgement. For example, when a friend shares with you the pickle she's in (as a result of a number of "silly decisions"), it's hard not to think: “Well, this is all your fault. You’ve made your bed, now you need to lie in it." Instead, compassion requires us to suspend judgement and to think about how to help. This active quality is what distinguishes compassion from empathy (to be discussed in the next section).

Self-compassion is another important dimension of compassion, which is concerned with encouraging people to practise self-care (for instance, meditation and mindfulness as a way to build resilience and awareness). Self-compassion has nothing to do with "spoiling or treating yourself". Rather, it is more about being gentle with oneself, such as by actively forgiving oneself for past mistakes or current shortcomings.

With self-compassion, you are in a better position to be compassionate to others—and have the energy, drive and motivation to be of authentic service to others. According to Kristin Neff, a leading scholar in self-compassion:

- *Self-compassion is not self-pity*
- *Self-compassion is not self-indulgence*
- *Self-compassion is not self-esteem*

She also points out that there is a difference between self-esteem and self-compassion.

In the working world, it is encouraging to see more leaders practising what is coming to be termed “compassionate leadership”. A *Forbes* article stated that in a survey of people affected by the pandemic, "90 per cent of participants felt such [compassionate] leaders improved their work-life balance" and "70 per cent of respondents who experienced compassion from their leaders were more productive than those that did not."

Compassionate leadership is a win-win for both companies and employees. Commitment to the organisation and strong engagement are just some of the hallmarks of a compassionate organisation. Workers' mental health also improves when they feel more able to discuss their issues with both their bosses and co-workers. Importantly too, psychological safety increases: firms can become more innovative and creative when their employees are not worried about "failure" or "risk of castigation" should they "get something wrong".

To summarise, compassion is not a "fluffy" concept. Instead, compassion...

1. *...promotes commitment to the organisation*
2. *...breeds more compassion*
3. *...works both ways (benefits both giver and receiver)*
4. *...fosters more collaboration in the workplace*
5. *...reduces staff turnover*
6. *...cultivates stronger bonds between co-workers*
7. *...reduces potential for burnout and promotes better mental health*
8. *...creates the right conditions for innovation and creativity*

Empathy

Empathy and compassion are closely related, and both are critical to the creation of more human workplaces and a more humane society. The reason why empathy is so important, particularly in an organisational context, is that it is linked to ethical decision-making and ethical leadership—and it's been found that ethical leadership is linked to improved employee performance. In the healthcare domain especially, empathy demonstrated towards patients leads to a range of positive health outcomes, as well as improved patient and staff satisfaction.

Empathy has also been found to be a key skill for leaders in the context of intercultural communications. When you can put yourself in the shoes of others, you can relate better to people of different cultures and backgrounds—and can therefore deliver more appropriate services.

So where exactly did “empathy”, as a concept, come from?

Back in 18th-century Britain, “sympathy”, as a moral and aesthetic concept, was keenly discussed by philosophers such as David Hume, Adam Smith and Edmund Burke. The first appearance of “empathy” was not until the early 20th century, when it was initially used to describe an aesthetic experience (as in the feeling you get as you react to a beautiful landscape, or in describing a luxurious piece of furniture). As a relatively new word, “empathy” is the best translation of the German word, *Einfühlung* (“in-feeling”), from which the English word originates. German psychology greatly influenced American psychology from the late 19th century—thanks to German emigrés who came to teach at American universities—and empathy as a word quickly caught on in psychology circles. By 1913, “empathy” had become the “generally accepted translation of *Einfühlung* and it has been part of the lexicon of psychology ever since.

In recent years, empathy has become quite a fixture of management and leadership terminology. For many people, especially in the business world, “empathy” sounds more scientific than “compassion”. However, I personally

regard the two as separate concepts, albeit related, that need to be seen as complementary but not interchangeable.

Empathy is something very special. It is the required precursor to the carrying out of a compassionate act to alleviate another's suffering.

In studies of corporate psychopaths (people who are hard-core narcissists who see others as mere pawns in their game), we find that empathy is twisted in such a way that such people can "read" others but don't care about them. This is why corporate psychopaths can come across as charming and often very funny. Many of them will engage in the practice of "gaslighting", whereby they will slowly but surely undermine the self-confidence of those they see as competitors, getting under the psychological skin of their colleagues: they start a slow but carefully calculated campaign of chipping away until the target of their efforts starts to show self-doubt and slowly begins to lose confidence in their abilities. Eventually, the target's grasp of reality starts to weaken, which is when the corporate psychopath can deliver the final blow of "no confidence in you", such that the victim gives up and leaves. So, we must be on our guard against those who would use empathy for nefarious purposes.

We must also be aware of the bias inherent in empathy. In his book, *Against Empathy*, psychologist Paul Bloom explains how humans are innately susceptible to this bias. Put simply, we tend to feel stronger empathy towards people who are more like us. We also identify more with singular instances of tragedy or loss of life, than with terrible events that happen on a grand scale. A missing child in our immediate neighbourhood is more likely to attract concern and attention at a deep level, compared to news stories about many children dying in faraway, war-torn lands. It is not that we cannot feel empathy for those who live on the other side of the world, but it is harder to do so without having the depth of familiarity with those environments. It is also more difficult to make sense of tragedies that happen on a huge scale: we feel sadness, but we may not be able to truly empathise. That is, until the tragedy starts to get closer to home.

COVID-19 has wrought tremendous hardship for many around the world. To salvage something good from all of this, we have to think about all the truly human things we have witnessed: the clapping for health workers around the world; balcony singing in Italy; people sewing masks around the clock in places where masks are not so readily available; the kitchens at SATS being repurposed to prepare meals for Singapore's quarantined migrant workers; the global concert featuring music superstars—the list goes on.

Looking ahead, our task is to distil this amazing humanity and try to make it matter more in our future world. Let us no longer talk about a "new normal",

for nothing about the near or distant future is going to be remotely normal, nor is characterising it as "new" of any particular use to us.

Rather, let us all think of the resetting of our planet in terms of bouncing *forwards*, not back.

Michael Jenkins is CEO and Co-founder of Expert Humans, which uses its ACE model to help organisations succeed. In a career spanning decades and continents, some of his past appointments include Director of INSEAD Executive Education (Singapore); Managing Director at the Center for Creative Leadership Asia Pacific (Singapore); CEO of Roffey Park Institute (UK and Singapore); and CEO of the Human Capital Leadership Institute (Singapore). Michael was named as one of the UK's Most Influential Thinkers in Human Resources by the UK's *HR Magazine* in 2013 and 2016. He is also a regular contributor at local and international conferences, where he presents on topics like humanising the workplace, new thinking in leadership development, and sustainability. Connect with him on LinkedIn.