

# Organization: Creating A Culture of Compassion

By John and Colette Hoff

## An Introduction

We began to re-work and re-write this article about our approach to organization prior to the Human Relations Laboratory this past summer. We stopped because we knew we did not understand compassion deeply enough. This fall (2008) we acknowledge that studying and practicing compassion has made a difference in our thinking and in the organizations we serve. In 1981, we incorporated the American Association for the Furtherance of Community to be a “think tank” and a creative source of energy to support communities that were springing up over the social landscape. The AAFC itself was a corporation organized as a social response or service group for people beyond us, yet it also became the place we tested out our fresh ideas. We have worked to develop a comprehensive methodology for personal and social change. Said simply: through our growth and learning we have attempted to encourage others to learn, grow, and accomplish. Our life and our livelihood involve demonstrating what has worked for us and what we see being effective in other communities. What we are presenting is an essay on our approach to community development and a statement of appreciation for the field of “whole systems design” –a contemporary approach to building organizations. In this statement, we are exploring how most organizations could become more friendly to the people within it and be more motivated by compassion in its contribution to society.

## I. A Whole Systems Design Approach

Three points outline our viewpoint of whole system design:

A. A **model is needed** for planning and coaching people.

B. **Teams are vital** and team building empowers individuals and keeps them steady through the duration of a project.

C. **The development of a learning community within an organization** liberates people’s creativity and guides their energy.

**A. Practitioners in whole system design** find it important to use a model for enabling personal creativity and shaping social creativity. This model involves encouraging individual creativity and willingness to be trained in social creativity. We can release our enthusiasm for our own creative ideas when we know that our leadership will help everyone do this within a defined model for social creativity. Leadership must understand and value having a shared model of creative design. **This statement to you, *Organization: Creating A Culture of Compassion* is such a model for working with individuals, utilizing the methodology of small groups or teams, and having the shared goal of designing a whole and wholesome system for persons who are committed to working constructively and creatively.** *Constructively* refers to the willingness and ability to collaborate. *Creatively* refers to the way each individual is choosing to

be true to his own creative insights and abilities. Similarly, *social creativity* involves the entire ensemble of persons seeing their wholeness much like individual musicians will themselves to be an orchestra. Using this metaphor, it can also be seen how various sections of the orchestra (percussion, strings, etc.) must help each other attain perfection. The section accomplishes this task by choosing a leader, for instance “the first violin,” as its coach and trainer. Again using our musical metaphor, the conductor often gathers these lead instrumentalists to help her experiment with interpretations and to explore the potentials of the orchestra.

Wherever creative people get together, be it in orchestras, dance troupes, sports, building construction, and so on, the following assumptions motivate the group.

- Everyone present is committed to being alert and in the mode of performance.
- Everyone present has appreciation of both the joys and costs of a performance orientation. They are usually bonded by their need to be supported while enduring the rigors of extreme concentration and effort.
- All persons in the creative assemblage are respectful of creative abilities, whether they come naturally or are hard earned.
- Both the individuals and the group-as-a-whole believe that there is great social value (human betterment) in their performance and that the value is increased through excellence.
- All agree that no matter what difficulties they face “the show will go on.” For instance, the orchestra will be doing its work in spite of bouts of flu and colds. It will also lose key leaders at the worst possible time. There will be lackluster performances, and the conductor will at times have bad moods and unrealistic expectations. Yet, the show does go on, even using the unfavorable reviews as clues to improvement and motivation for excellence.
- This whole group of people know they survive only because of an optimistic attitude. The rigors of self and social discipline make humor and ease of relationship prime values. The best members are not only the most skilled but also those persons who are skilled at collaboration and training others. The tension of performance must be balanced by the satisfactions of personal improvement and social accomplishment. Musicians comment on the deep feeling that develops among them when they do music together. As people form teams of any kind they observe that the process of team development—identifying strengths and weaknesses, learning to help each other where needed, rearranging individual schedules so that a team plan is possible, creating a culture of appreciation—are precisely the activities that increase our capacity for unconditioned compassion.
- Compassion is present in the form of **respect** for others’ proficiency and **celebration** for exceptional performance

**B. The designing of a social system not only focuses on individuals and the liberation of their creativity, but also requires the “clustering” of individuals for a variety of reasons.**

Sometimes these clusters are a basic unit of support and accomplishment in the system. In this case, the cluster must learn from the field of group dynamics how to become a group. The formation of a group, which is to be a home base for its members by providing support and

guidance, involves appreciating and implementing group technologies. These technologies are sometimes simple processes and at other times are presented as experiences through which people discover what they need to learn and through which they learn it.

When a group does more than provide support for each other, that is, when a group takes on a task, it is best to call it a *team*. A team must divide its time between the maintenance of relationships, the support of each member, and the accomplishment of the task, evaluating and then re-approaching the task with the intention in mind. Teams must deal with both task and group maintenance. It is vital that teams create and assign roles related to:

1. Support of its members.
2. Maintenance of relationship and groupness.
3. Task-oriented roles such as supervisor.
4. There needs to be a coordinator of each team—coordinating the team with the remainder of the organization (developing a system).
5. Group members with specific duties.

Team building is a vital aspect of organizational behavior. Yet it must also be recognized that a number of aspects of team function—standards, norms, and guidelines—are provided for the team by the organizational **system**. As we attempt to create more compassionate organizations, we must examine closely the difficulties that we will face:

1. There is a level of organizational life that might be called its culture and at this level there is an awareness of relationship and the elements that add to or detract from relational satisfaction. Close relationships among employees occasionally lead to troubles that need to be addressed formally and on company time. Relationship problems are divisive and expensive.
2. Since the role of technology changes the way we work, with some people working from their own homes and others working remotely in cubicles within the same building, the fact that a corporation can accomplish a great deal by using people that do not even see each other could be seen as a lesson that paying attention to relationships is a waste of time and doesn't get tasks done. There are some arguments that costs can be reduced and troubles avoided by ignoring relationships.
3. Organizations have become politicized; that is, the cultural wars of society as well as progressive public morality about discrimination have created regulations that raise the stakes for management and owners.
4. All this is about work settings within profit and nonprofit organizations becoming increasingly stressed by the culture wars of the society and economic goals that require unlimited growth and increased productivity, and higher esteem with the public.
5. Organizations, having discovered systems theory, have become efficient at building a system that hires, monitors, reminds, rewards, rebukes, trains, and requires the individual to learn what is expected of him and fulfill the expectations. The efficiency of the organization and the system with which it surrounds each of its members is experienced by member/citizens "as a nagging mother and a bullying father." As modern people we are increasingly being alienated from our organizations. The result

in member/citizens is a growing apathy toward expectations, a growing sense of entitlement to relief from unjust requirements, and advocacy provided by the organization for the protection of the individual. All of this highlights the need to help organizations see the value of increasing compassion on everyone's part in order to assist every system of accountability to be carried on with respect that encourages cooperation. A system can be a hard machine or it can be a well-oiled and smooth-running machine, and also, system can be experienced as a compassionate relationship that intends well for all concerned and attempts to create an environment that is sensitive to human rights and human dignity.

**C. A third contribution from the field of whole system design is to help us understand what a social system is and how it can be altered for better—or damaged.** For the past 25 years organizational theorists have been praising the value of *whole system design*, which is actually a method that provides efficiency to the system and also requires continuous training and relationship building among members/employees. We are wanting to point out that while literature over these years hasn't talked about increasing compassion, it has used many words and concepts that are quite similar: sensitivity training, creating a climate of mutual appreciation, getting to "yes," sharing power and responsibility, personal fulfillment on the job, job enrichment, career tracks, enjoying teamwork, developing people and developing a corporate future. So we think the word *compassion* adds something in that it affirms the value of feeling for each other and for helping each other. The wholesome organization is being compassionate toward all of its people by being well conceived and well led. Organizations love us by having effective systems in which to support and guide us. In fact, the literature indicates that when an organization is not proactive in stating its vision, mission, goals and methods, it will become vulnerable to individual manipulation and the attrition of energy. Peter Senge<sup>1</sup> presents the viewpoint that organizations should and must create a learning organization within their corporate structure, a community of co-workers who work together across all dividing lines and hierarchical taboos in order to obtain a sense of the whole. Every individual must develop a feel for, and a concern about, what the organization is attempting to accomplish and to see his part in furthering the mission. A learning organization may be seen as a network of persons scattered throughout the organization, who are working to understand the whole and share appropriate information throughout the organization. **This network of people in learning mode becomes an infrastructure generating and dispensing information and suggestions for productive change.**

The word *infrastructure* is important in organizations. Some of the infrastructures of a house are its electrical system and its plumbing and heating systems. Infrastructures in organizations provide similar functions throughout the whole organization. There is, for instance, a financial system that must include an accounting of all money not just some of it. Similarly, there is usually a personnel system that is uniform throughout the organization. Other typical infrastructures involve communication, transportation, purchasing, and human services, such as

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<sup>1</sup> Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of Learning Organizations* Doubleday/Currency, New York, 1990.

supervision and training. These infrastructures contain sub-systems and each connects every part of the organization to the whole.

As we encourage the conscious intention to bring compassion into an organization we are moving toward creating a culture of compassion, that is compassion will be not just an ideal, not just an aspirational value but a practical value. Culture includes many elements, some of which are intangible: the company's vision (or lack of it), the employee's attitudes, the company's reputation and market viability, the employee's participation in policy making, the organization's social responsibility, and whether or not employees are involved in a union. Consider also, the percentage of male to female employees, the presence of minorities, and the policies of the company around health insurance, retirement, and other benefits. Consider also whether the organization's workplace is old or new, well kept or not. Notice also how people are dressed, whether music is allowed in work areas, and whether employees are encouraged to take breaks or vacation holidays. What is used to motivate workers, and how are they reprimanded? Culture refers to the people environment as the real place—the experienced place—where people work. Other words used to describe the cultural environment are: *climate*, *morale*, and *working conditions*.

In summary, the intentional design or redesign of an organizational system involves these three activities: **first**, the activity of valuing its members or workers by recognizing their worth and utilizing their creativity. **Second**, designing involves connecting people to each other, helping teams to utilize the technologies from group dynamics to efficiency planning. **Third**, the organization must present itself as a unified system and show each member and group how they are to be related effectively to their small group and to the system as a whole. We propose that “creating a culture of compassion” is a useful way to acknowledge and appreciate the organization's respect for the human rights and dignity of members/employees as well as the respect and appreciation shown the organization by employees when they serve the organization with a sense of appreciation for its vision, mission, and leadership.

## **II. Compassion as a Core Intention and Process**

After reading this paragraph, pause for a few minutes to reflect on what it is that our organizations do to make you feel better about yourself and the work you do. For instance, they learn your name, spell it right, and address you in a way that you prefer. They respect your need for a sense of individual dignity and contract with you clearly. They also learn your background, including your interests and skills. By utilizing you well, they add to your sense of worth.

### **A. Compassion for the Individual**

Expressing compassion for individuals is most important when an organization is experiencing conflict or is in a process of change. Let us imagine a community as it gathers its citizens to discuss changing the route of a freeway. They are informed regarding the proposed changes; told of a meeting where they might be heard, and are welcomed by an appropriate leader. After the leadership has related some history and clarified the proposed changes, it becomes clear to all that many differing viewpoints are represented in the room. At this point, it is important to recognize the value in each viewpoint by helping individuals to be part of a small group (5 to 25) of persons with similar viewpoints. Each group is encouraged to select its own

convener who is asked to make sure that every individual is given a brief opportunity to state a viewpoint and concerns. When all have identified their concerns, the group is asked to select a spokesperson to represent the group and its range of opinions. Usually, this spokesperson is asked to sit on a coordinating group, which will carry on further discussions in the presence of (or accountable to) the total assembly.

Notice that each individual has been informed, invited, welcomed officially; and, each person is placed in a small enough group that she can be heard and her position clarified by others. Also, each individual participates in selecting a representative leader and has an opportunity to view a process of coordination and public debate. It is vital to democratic process that each individual feels empowered in such a manner and recognizes the training that is needed to trust such a process. Remember that individuals have an opportunity to offer leadership and to rigorously negotiate for leaders who they know and trust. This is practical grassroots democracy. The training must further encourage each person to support the leadership that has been selected and to stay in touch with that leader's experience of leading.

### **B. Compassion at the Group or Team Level**

Just as individuals could experience compassion from their organizations when given information or knowledge and by being recognized by official leadership operating within a rational process, so also groups are empowered by being given a formal purpose. The group is further empowered through selecting its leadership, documenting the work of the group, and requiring accountability from its representative on a council or other such coordinating body.

Groups or teams are also empowered by the whole organization by being reminded that each group is a part of a system that relies on it to operate within clear processes that are respectful of individuals, leadership, and the system. Thus, one contribution of the system is that it offers communication principles and helpful ground rules for group function. The system empowers its groups and is in turn empowered by those same groups. This involves a mutual empowerment of the functions each provides. Compassion motivates compassionately.

### **C. Desiring Compassion for the Organization Itself—the Whole System**

Individuals have a tendency to become so involved in the work and relationships of a small group that they forget the purposes of the larger organization and the challenges the organization faces in participating in a still larger system of governance. Our democratic society presents to us a system of governance that spans a spectrum of functions extending from an individual's participation in a small local group through neighborhood district, to city and county, state and region, to national and international levels of political activity. A common bumper sticker reads, "Think globally and act locally." Citizens operating at a local level are most effective when they remain aware of the contributions being made at each level of governance. To be effective in part of an organization requires being knowledgeable about the whole organization and its interfaces with other organizations. Any organization is in reality a system of organized groupings. Success in any venture requires collaboration among many people at several levels of political and social responsibility.

Consider now what it is that unites one part of an organization to another: a leader links his or her own group to the whole enterprise. Also, written communications in-form and in-struct all

persons in an organization regarding how to think and act in concert with one another. Remember our use of the orchestra as an analogy. (“You must follow the music and know the score!”) In facilities such as office buildings, offices are usually arranged in some order so that a process can be completed with a minimum of trouble. The organization usually provides a list of telephone numbers and e-mail addresses for efficient communication. Nowadays, many transactions, even financial ones, can be handled electronically. Notice that leaders, mailings, buildings, telephones, and computers are the most common illustrations of infrastructure. The efficiency of an organization is often measured by the viability of its infrastructures. Change within the organization usually involves altering infrastructure, thereby improving the ability of the organization to act as a more coordinated whole.

The wholeness of a compassionate organization is attained through the embodiment of its mission and goals. Wholeness is also expressed through well-designed processes and trained leaders, which impress an individual with the organization’s competence and empower that individual to feel competent as well. An important goal of any organization should be to create a work environment, a culture that values people feeling good about doing business together compassionately. **This must be a declared value of the system and reflect cultural patterns of respect for each other’s time, feelings, needs, and goals.**

#### **D. Empowering the Compassionate Process**

By process, we refer to any flow of activities that moves toward a goal or fulfills a purpose. Our modern society has become very process-oriented because the average citizen has come to know and understand when a process is working or has broken down. This public sophistication with process orientation forces us to differentiate between *problem* (involves a process breakdown that can be fixed) and *issue* (a need to change the process being used). Problems are usually solved quickly. However, issues reoccur because societal needs and personal desires change from time to time, usually requiring a change in the process itself. Organizations must learn to differentiate between solving problems and discussing issues. Issues cannot be resolved quickly. They need to be discussed more deeply and re-examined in the light of changing social realities.

Most organizations could be more compassionate if they identified the issues that can be counted on to resurface on a regular basis. Illustrations are: population growth, changing technologies, fears about rising crime rate, sexuality, the conduct of politicians, and economic unrest. It would be best for a community to create task forces to discuss such issues in depth and to recommend standard processes for dealing with issues whenever they arise.

Any system of governance compassionately stabilizes itself by designing processes with great care, using them routinely and applying them to issues with a confidence born of preparation, which has been done beforehand—prior to a crisis!

#### **E. Acting Compassionately Toward Leadership**

A trained and effective leadership is generally conceded to be the most valuable asset possessed by any organization. It takes years for a leader to know her or his “constituency.” Further, it takes a lot of experience to learn how to respond to attacks or crises in a mature and non-anxious manner. For this reason, any organization finds itself committed to the support of its

leaders, even to the protection of leaders who find themselves in the midst of trouble. Yet, because of the thoroughness and quickness of media coverage, it is becoming increasingly difficult for organizations to anticipate crises and to act wisely. Literature is reminding us that leaders with the most potential are declining public responsibility in order to avoid the exposure and ridicule often involved in running for public office. Obviously, we must find better ways of selecting, training, empowering, and protecting leadership.

**Compassion for leadership is a key issue.** It is not just a problem to be solved through occasional elections; it is an issue, which must be addressed in every organization on an on-going basis. We must regularly ask and answer the questions: What do I/we want from our leaders? What kind of a relationship do we want with our leaders? Would being compassionate toward our leaders encourage/require them to be compassionate with us?

The growing edge in organizational studies concerned with leader development indicates that successful organizations are so because they develop the leaders they need and motivate and retain them through compassionate attention to their needs. Don't let the picture of renegade CEOs escaping on golden parachutes keep you from seeing common sense in treating leaders well and as a leader yourself requiring other people to treat you well because of your leadership abilities (and not simply because of the tasks you do).

### **F. Being More Compassionate Toward Organizational Change—by Planning Change**

Organizations go through changes. Frequently, they change for the worse. People refuse to support them and they are put out of existence. Our beloved community is close to such an experience. However, organizations with good and wise leadership plan their changes; they develop an ability to learn about their own organization.

Today many well-run organizations seek to begin an intentional process of organizational development every three years. An organization's infrastructure and culture must be intentionally developed, and for organizational development to happen, leaders must inspire and educate members/employees of the organization. Communities must be developed, and for that to happen, leaders need to inspire and educate members of the community regarding the advantages of planning change, developing leadership, and doing the work of organizing, which only begins with claiming a mission and setting goals.

### **III. Compassion in Organizations**

When Colette and I were reworking this paper the week of September 14-21, 2008, we occasionally kept one eye on the television, which was obsessed with the collapsing stock market, banks, insurance companies, and the auto industry. Pundits appeared from all directions with very little good to say about organizations and leaders. At the same time those same pundits had many suggestions for what would be curative: more regulation, a less materialistic focus, a need to restore business ethics and public morality. And the most clear-headed and wise commentators pointed out that most people had agreed for many years that the whole system needed changing, that regulations were outdated by changes in technology and globalization. Some said, "we've been worried about this happening yet there seemed no way to stop the world as it was and make room for a different one. John asked if we could put off finishing this paper until we could sort out our own heads on where compassion fits into a national and international threat such as we face now.



It appears that many leaders in government and industry have not thought compassion to be patriotic let alone a valid expression of heroism. Then we remembered the words of the Dalai Lama who said, *compassion is the activism of our time*. When organizational matters go wrong, they affect many different people in different ways. Conflict happens. Infrastructures fragment. Leaders act impulsively. Well-intended politicians state comforting platitudes rather than turn to others for deeper conversation. By September 21, the most effective presentations did not come from politicians or official government personnel but from journalists and through media formats. It was on television that we saw five Secretaries of State have a vigorous discussion about international affairs and how they impacted our economy. CNN also gathered a cross-section of key people from industry and finance to share and debate their proposals for solution. They were generally forthright and well-stated that there was no room for partisan posturing if we were to be successful.

If individual narcissism and the culture wars of partisan thinking have kept us as a nation from being compassionate toward our nation and its needs to update its infrastructure then compassion is offered as an anecdote to both narcissism and small-mindedness. What really enabled us (John and Colette) to get to compassion was the humbling recognition that in our own two lives we were so caught up in business as usual and getting various tasks accomplished that we were not attending to personal problems and organizational issues. We noticed that the intention to be compassionate must be followed soon by compassionate actions. Perhaps the most compassionate thing we could do for our organizations is to allow them to stop for periods of time for retooling, re-minding, and refueling the energies of compassion. Pause now to reflect on the organizations in your life, the teams you are on, and even the relationships you are in, and you will probably notice that it would help to just stop, feel, before moving on again in a more compassionate way.

Organizational development works with what is called “interventions” because organizations need the intervention of pausing in their routine lives to access their deeper needs and *real* problems. In the light of global climate changes, cultural shifts, economic instability, and general social fragmentation, we are stressed as individuals and as organizations. It is good for us at all levels of relationship and working together to pause, reflect, and have feelings for all involved, including the organizations that contain our work and the leaders that guide the organizations. Just as individual meditation requires stopping and quieting ourselves in order to familiarize ourselves with our own minds and our own feelings, organizations require reflection and re-visioning every three to five years. This is the viewpoint of Teleos Institute which promotes *resonant leadership* that trains leaders to utilize emotional and social intelligence for re-shaping organizations through processes of reflection and conversations in order to increase mindfulness, hope, and compassion.