

## The Role of Self-Compassion in Leadership

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Being a leader is hard work.

You are the one who chooses the strategy and makes decisions about what to do, when and why, even when you're not sure if it's the right way to go. You take the criticism; you take the blame; you take responsibility. You fix the mistakes. You make things right. You make sure things go well. You manage your employees; you manage your boss; you manage the work.

That's *a lot*.

The pressures are no less challenging when you're leading *yourself*. When you're:

Striving for your next career promotion

Proving yourself by exceeding your goals

Learning new things to elevate to that next level of leadership

Working on personal growth and transformation

Dealing with big things in your personal life while maintaining consistency at work ...

... you have to do *all those same things* that you're doing as a leader—for yourself.

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You have to have a strategy for the things you want to accomplish for yourself.

You have to make decisions about what to do, when and why, for yourself.

And all that criticism, blame and responsibility? All those mistakes and managing? Even those, you have to handle when they come *from you*.

That's a problem, because the same *you* that is doing everything in your power to succeed is the *you* that also beats yourself up, questions your competence and loses confidence. All of that makes succeeding in your aspirations a lot more difficult and a lot less fun.

We can turn this all around with a little self-compassion.

You can get to a place where leading yourself toward your goals and aspirations is easier, lighter and more fun. Here are five ways to do that.

## **1. Go back to the vision.**

Leadership starts and ends with your vision—that end game you're striving so hard to achieve.

When you get overwhelmed, try this exercise:

Stand up.

Walk away.

Sit somewhere quiet and peaceful.

Close your eyes.

Envision the future as you want it to be.

Detaching from the day-to-day in this way only takes a few minutes. It's just a little break—what psychologists call a “pattern interrupt.” More than that, the element of envisioning your ideal future for just a few minutes can lift you up to a place of inspiration and joy.

You will go back to work after your break, but now you're doing it with a little excitement, knowing that whatever you're working on is leading you to that vision.

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## 2. Choose a change in perspective.

We choose our thoughts. We even choose our emotions. Recognizing this gives us great power to create a different experience for ourselves than the one we're living now.

Let's imagine it's one of those times things aren't going well. Your perspective might sound something like this:

"I'm never going to get this right!"

"I'm always saying/doing the wrong thing!"

"I don't even know what I'm doing!"

The emotions that go along with those words range from mildly frustrated to aggravated to downright depressed, and none of that is conducive to your success.

But again, we can turn this around. Here's another exercise: Try listening to your negative selftalk and saying the literal exact opposite.

"I'm going to get this right!"

"I'm saying and doing the right thing."

"I know what I'm doing."

If you talk this way to yourself with a reassuring and playful tone, you might even tease your own way into a lighter, more hopeful mood, which is going to change the experience and allow you to be more successful.

## 3. See the wisdom in slowing down.

If you're a high achiever, it's hard to slow down. The whole point of your endeavor is to go further, faster! But if you think about what makes you at your best, it probably *isn't* stressing out, forcing things to happen or running yourself into the ground.

I recently coached a team that was on deadline for a big project. They were clearly rushing to get things done. The team started to panic, complaining, "I need more time!" They were skipping

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steps, and I could see that even if they met the deadline, they wouldn't get the best outcome they were hoping for.

What broke the pattern was the wisdom of the team leader, who had the courage to say, "I think we should slow down." She acknowledged the situation, reaffirmed the long-term goals and moved the deadline. With more time, everyone could breathe. They recalibrated the calendar; wrote a more careful, thorough action plan; and moved forward feeling more connected and respected as they strove to not just meet a deadline but achieve their goals.

What would it look like if you did that for yourself?

#### **4. Know when enough is enough.**

There is a prayer that goes, in part, "It is night after a long day. What has been done has been done. What has not been done has not been done. Let it be."

One strategy for self-compassion in the midst of hard work is to learn to recognize the shift in you when you're just *done*: when your brain is tired, and progress feels sluggish. These are cues that it's time to quietly, neatly stop the striving, give yourself credit for what has been done, take heart that tomorrow is another day and let enough be enough for now.

#### **5. Practice acceptance.**

Almost everything we've talked about so far benefits from acceptance: the art of letting things be as they are and trusting it will all work out.

We started this article with a recognition that leadership can be hard, and that's also true when you're leading yourself. Practice self-compassion; see what an impact it has on your progress, your achievements and your life experience. It's a kinder, gentler way of life, but it's important for you as a leader; it's also far more effective for meeting your goals.

When you've practiced self-compassion with yourself, try these ideas with your teams, and you can reach even higher levels of leadership.

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