

# The most powerful leadership principle aboard the corona-coaster



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[Katya Andresen](#), Head of Marketing & Customer Experience  
writer / she, her, hers

Katya Andresen, a veteran marketer, nonprofit professional, and LinkedIn Influencer, is the author of *Robin Hood Marketing: Stealing Corporate Savvy to Sell Just Causes*.

I've heard a good term for our emotional landscape these days: the [corona-coaster](#). It's an apt metaphor for the rapidly shifting, rising, falling, twisting, tumultuous experience of living through these times and, sadly in too many cases, for the course of the virus itself.

Maybe I seize onto this metaphor because I find roller coasters rough. I have iffy inner ears and get dizzy turning into a circle, much less turning upside down. To me, a roller coaster is one big disorientation machine. And we are in a state of disorientation. Life, work and school are all suddenly happening - imperfectly - within the same four walls. We're there for each other, but it's virtual. Zoom screens ensure we're not absent yet can't make us fully present. Time warps. One moment feels impossibly slow and another is head-jangling in its rate of change. Quarantine feels too small and too big at the same time. We grieve so many losses. Yet just as we're plunging into despair, unexpected detours swerve toward grace or gratitude or joy just long enough to catch our breath.

You're on this corona-coaster, but you're also caring for the others on it with you. And that can be disorienting, too. Because what we have in common is we're all strapped in for this wild, dissonant ride. But no one is on the same ride. Some people are scared, some are fine, some are angry, some are lonely, some are sick, some are bored, and some are busy. Some are helping, and some need help. Some feel good, then feel guilty for feeling good. Some feel bad, then feel guilty for feeling bad. And many of us fit a range of these and myriad other descriptions at any given moment.

## Leading aboard the corona-coaster

So what does good leadership look like right now, when we are in many different states of being? It's a lot of things, some of which I wrote about [in my last post](#). But above all things, it's about compassion. Compassion is the first and most powerful leadership principle at a time like this.

A few years back, I bought a book called [There Is No Good Card for This: What to Say and Do When Life Is Scary, Awful, and Unfair to the People You Love](#). One line really stuck with me: "Kindness is your credential." Author Dr. Kelsey Crowe writes, "All our difficult times involve some degree of shame, fear and loneliness. At times like that, we don't need anyone to impress

us or skillfully talk us out of our pain. We mostly just need the kindness that compels anyone to try."

There are no good cards for this time. But kindness is our credential. And compassion is our qualification.

Compassion sounds like a soft, feel-good call to action, but make no mistake, it's both essential and potent. Compassion encompasses noticing the challenges of others, feeling for them, and responding in their time of need. It requires us to pay attention by seeing and listening to the experiences of others, to authentically desire to help, and to help. When we do these things, we enhance not only the well-being of others but also our own. We are collectively more connected and supported.

Our job is to make room for compassion, to enter that space with those around us, and to engage in acts, however small, that may not feel like enough but can mean a lot. In so doing, we are called to several forms of compassion: Self compassion, demonstrated compassion and compassionate acts.

### **The pre-requisite: Self compassion**

Self compassion is an important starting point. As someone who struggles with harsh inner judges, I find this easier said than done, and in the past, I've considered self compassion self-indulgent. But it is not selfish or weak. It's actually the foundation of mental health and a prerequisite to caring for others. When you neglect this step or forget to care for yourself, you deplete your ability to show up in the ways you want.

Dr. Kristin Neff describes self compassion in three [dimensions](#). First, we have to extend warmth and understanding to ourselves: "People cannot always be or get exactly what they want. When this reality is denied or fought against suffering increases in the form of stress, frustration and self-criticism. When this reality is accepted with sympathy and kindness, greater emotional equanimity is experienced." Second, self-compassion means recognizing we're not in this alone. Rather than feeling uniquely bad about who or how we are, we remind ourselves that feeling flawed and suffering are a shared human experience. Third, we strike a balance between mindfulness and over-identification. That means we mindfully allow ourselves to feel how we're feeling, without suppressing the negative, while at the same time relating our experiences to the perspective of a broader, connected community. Again, not in a judgmental way -- *I feel so bad but so-and-so has it worse* -- but rather, in the spirit of, *we're all in this together, whatever our experience*. As Neff puts it, in this way, "our feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated."

### **Demonstrating compassion**

As [Pema Chodron](#) has said, "Compassion for others begins with kindness to ourselves." So once we practice self compassion, we fuel an authentic state of connection to others. That's a feeling we then need to express.

As a leader on the corona-coaster, it's easy to want to stay busy with urgent problem-solving and crisis management. It gives us a feeling of control. But we have to take time to notice how we're feeling and how others are feeling. We need to observe, ask and listen to the experiences of others. And the only way to create the space for that to happen is to authentically demonstrate that ourselves.

Talking about our feelings with others might seem like letting our inner vulnerability get out of hand. But we have to remember that if we don't do that, we don't give others room to do that. When we don't connect, people don't feel connected. So we must show we're deeply human and in so doing, create the supportive sense of our collective humanity. Acknowledge what's happening to you and your team, with each person's experience being unique. Be honest about your own experience, to create the space for others to be honest about their own. This step is powerful in helping people feel connected and resilient.

### **Compassionate acts**

Acting upon our compassion is the third important step. We should strive to create an environment that provides people with support however they uniquely need to navigate this crisis. We can show through our actions, however small, that we are here to support our teams through this time. And we should support those who want to help others, as we build a culture of compassion.

I'm deeply grateful to work in a compassionate culture full of thoughtful acts that illustrate this kind of care of colleagues. And I'm inspired when I see it beyond the workplace, sparking hope amid disturbing headlines, from people cheering health professionals at the end of a shift to the volunteers sewing masks to the neighbors cooking meals for each other.

The University of British Columbia's studies of compassion have [described](#) how this provides two benefits: context for meaning and context for action. As cited in the Harvard Business Review, with "*context for meaning*, the leader creates an environment in which people can freely express and discuss the way they feel, which in turn helps them to make sense of their pain, seek or provide comfort, and imagine a more hopeful future. The second level is a *context for action*—the leader creates an environment in which those who experience or witness pain can find ways to alleviate their own and others' suffering."

We need to bring compassion to our workplaces, in real life or virtually, and everywhere else we can. I'm very concerned about the ways in which the stress of this crisis has created public debates and divisions devoid of the better angels of our nature. That's an added sickness we can ill afford.

The Harvard Business Review [article](#) I cited above was written in the wake of 9/11. It said, "There is always grief somewhere in the room." Someone is always struggling, at work or close to home. And now, most everyone is. While our circumstances are all unique, our need for compassion is universal. It's our job in the face of this overwhelming reality, as large and loud as the mother of all roller coasters rushing and rattling us to the core, to treat ourselves with

kindness. And then to spread our compassion to everyone we can. Fortunately, coronavirus is not the only thing that's contagious. The healing force of compassion is too.