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Rehumanizing Leadership: Compassion Disruption Framework an Integrated Approach to Ineffective Leadership

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Abstract

From ancient hierarchies to modern organizations, leadership has both inspired human progress and perpetuated systemic dysfunction. Despite centuries of inquiry, the paradox persists: leadership remains among the most studied yet least understood constructs in the social sciences. Traditional theories — rooted in authority, personality, or performance — have not adequately explained why ineffective leadership endures across contexts. This article addresses the need to examine “bad leadership” not simply as a moral failure, but as a relational and organizational breakdown shaped by culture, communication patterns, and the absence of compassion. Drawing upon universal, contextual, and organizational frameworks, this discussion advances a systemic definition of ineffective leadership as the erosion of relational integrity — the weakening of empathy, psychological safety, and shared purpose as foundational to collective performance. Through an interdisciplinary synthesis of leadership theory, neuroscience, and organizational behavior, compassion is positioned not as a soft skill but as a disruptive force capable of interrupting entrenched patterns of apathy, miscommunication, and disengagement. Compassion reframes leadership effectiveness as an emergent property of relational systems rather than an individual trait. It functions as both a corrective and preventive mechanism — realigning leader intent with follower experience and fostering climates of trust, inclusion, and learning. The article examines how compassion challenges traditional power structures, mitigates burnout, and transforms ineffective practices into opportunities for adaptive growth. Ultimately, this work proposes a Compassion Disruption Framework, integrating theoretical and applied insights to guide leaders, educators, and organizations in recognizing and addressing ineffectiveness before organizational dysfunction escalates into ethical erosion. In doing so, it argues that the antidote to bad leadership is compassion practiced as accountability, connection, and courage.

Introduction

From the dawn of civilization to the modern workplace, leadership has shaped societies and captivated scholars [53,67]. Yet despite its pervasive influence, leadership remains elusive and enigmatic. The terms *leaders*, *leading*, and *leadership* are interdependent but notoriously difficult to define universally or with scholarly consensus [55]. Early definitions were leader-centric, describing leadership circularly as “that which is done by a leader,” a leader as “one who leads,” or leading as “to be in charge” [17]. This conceptual circularity prompted a shift toward relational

and systemic perspectives that emphasize communication, shared meaning, and context [27,56,85]. Over time, leadership theories have evolved from early notions of authority and direction [13,15] to frameworks emphasizing interpersonal dynamics and goal achievement [12,60] and later to transformational, motivational, and adaptive models [8,19]. Contemporary perspectives highlight reciprocal influence and alignment between leaders and followers [58,69,103]. Despite this progression, most approaches remain fragmented, focusing primarily on individual leader

traits (universal), situational contingencies (contextual), or organizational structures. However, few studies integrate these perspectives, leaving the question of why ineffective leadership persists unanswered. Despite decades of study, leadership remains ambiguously defined, and the nature of ineffectiveness continues to elude consensus [46,73]. As *Stogdill* (1974:259) [95] famously observed, “there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept.” Ongoing debates over what constitutes “good” versus “bad” leadership reflect this enduring ambiguity with [70,97]. The problem is compounded by construct proliferation: since Dunette’s [23] critique of conceptual overlap, leadership research has generated an ever-expanding list of theories and styles, often rebranding rather than refining foundational ideas [22,37]. This article responds to Kellerman’s call [67] to confront bad leadership directly by examining ineffectiveness as a consequential and often relational form of failure—one shaped by cultural dynamics, communication breakdowns, and the erosion of compassion. Ineffectiveness is not simply the absence of effectiveness; it is a systemic phenomenon with recognizable patterns, causes, and consequences — ranging from poor decision-making and follower disengagement to toxic climates and organizational crises [1,42]. Three central gaps guide this discussion: (1) the lack of a systemic definition of ineffective leadership, (2) unclear boundaries between ineffective and unethical leadership, and (3) limited integration of universal, contextual, and organizational perspectives. To address these, the discussion bridges theoretical divides to explore why leadership ineffectiveness persists and how it can be disrupted. By integrating universal, contextual, and organizational approaches, it proposes both a systemic definition of ineffectiveness and a practical disruption framework. The discussion situates ineffectiveness within Kellerman’s typology of bad leadership [61], examines core approaches, and concludes with strategies to disrupt ineffective leadership in organizations.

Ineffective as Bad Leadership

Advancing a systemic definition of bad leadership as ineffectiveness requires clarifying its nature and underlying dynamics. Ineffective leadership has often been viewed as the mere absence of effectiveness — a perspective rooted in the idea of “bad as the absence of good” [26,50] — rather than as a distinct and multifaceted social phenomenon [17,75,78]. Early studies contrasted the positive outcomes of good leadership with the negative consequences of bad leadership [32] while recent research reveals greater complexity: good leadership may yield adverse outcomes, and bad leadership can sometimes produce beneficial ones [67]. Rather than simply the opposite of effectiveness, ineffective leadership represents a systemic construct — complex, multidimensional, and contextual [38,82,90]. *Kellerman* (2004) [61] advanced this understanding by distinguishing between (a) effective and ineffective, classifying leaders as good when competent and bad when incompetent, (b) ethical and unethical, with good leaders aligning with moral principles and bad leaders

deviating from them, and (c) leadership that is both ineffective and unethical. This model clarified that leaders may be ineffective yet ethical, effective yet unethical, or both ineffective and unethical. Ineffectiveness, like immorality, can cause harm and therefore belongs within the spectrum of bad leadership. Kellerman further identified seven types of bad leadership: three performance-based (incompetence, rigidity, and intemperance) and four moral (callousness, corruption, insularity, and evil). Her framework challenged idealized portrayals of leadership and revealed how failure worsens when reinforced by follower compliance [63,64]. In *The End of Leadership* [63], she described bad leadership as a “social disease” that, if unchecked, deteriorates “from bad to worse” [64]. Within this framework, ineffective leadership — marked by incompetence, rigidity, or maladaptation — differs from unethical leadership, which involves moral transgression [16,18,81]. Ineffectiveness erodes trust and performance through misalignment with situational demands [9,42], whereas unethical behavior entails intentional harm. Yet the two frequently intersect: chronic ineffectiveness can become ethically concerning when it reflects negligence or disregard for duty of care [21,45]. Conversely, unethical behavior may appear effective when it produces short-term gains at long-term cost [81,85]. Related constructs, such as destructive leadership [89] and toxic leadership [68], capture similar dysfunctions in which leader traits corrode relationships and hinder goal attainment [72].

Leadership failure often blurs the boundary between ineffectiveness and immorality. A leader may be ethical yet ineffective (e.g., lacking adaptability), effective yet unethical (e.g., coercively achieving results), or both ineffective and unethical [61]. These overlaps are especially pronounced under contextual pressures that amplify leader limitations [21,26,80]. Kellerman’s continuum illustrates that ineffectiveness spans a spectrum — from passivity to authoritarianism -- and that leadership failure rarely remains static. At one end, incompetent and absentee leaders fail to meet role demands, eroding trust and engagement *Skogstad et al.* 2014 [50]. At one end of this broad range, incompetent or absentee leaders fail to meet fundamental role demands, gradually eroding trust, clarity, and engagement. At the other end, rigid or authoritarian leaders overcontrol and resist adaptation, suppressing autonomy, creativity, and psychological safety. These patterns align with Kellerman’s four phases of deterioration, in which bad leadership begins with initial problems that are often subtle and tolerated, persists as dysfunction becomes normalized, worsens as relational and organizational harm accumulates, and ultimately becomes systemic, shaping culture and enabling widespread dysfunction. Taken together, the broad range of ineffectiveness and the escalating phases through which leadership failure progresses illustrate how everyday shortcomings can evolve into entrenched dysfunction. These dynamics highlight that bad leadership is not merely a matter of individual traits but a relational and organizational process shaped by context, culture, and follower response. This recognition provides the foundation for examining broader tensions in the leadership literature. It

sets the stage for considering how scholars and practitioners grapple with the persistent gap between normative expectations and lived organizational realities. Despite extensive scholarship, tension persists between leadership theory and practice [83]. The dissonance between *what leaders should do* and *what they actually do* continues to challenge both scholars and practitioners [4]. Distinguishing ineffectiveness from immorality, as emphasized, is essential for conceptual precision and practical intervention. Leadership success and failure emerge from the dynamic interplay among leader, follower, and context [75,106]. Clarifying where ineffectiveness ends and unethical conduct begins provides the conceptual foundation for examining universal, contextual, and organizational perspectives on leadership failure.

Approaches To Bad Leadership as in Ineffective – Universal, Contextual, And Organizational

Leadership research has long shifted between universal and situational explanations of effectiveness. Early studies focused on traits and behaviors that predicted success, while later models emphasized context, contingency, and organizational systems [6]. Contextual leadership models highlight situational influences, yet organizational psychology provides deeper insight into perception, motivation, group dynamics, and emotional regulation — factors that shape leaders' responses to those contexts. However, a disconnect persists between organizational psychology theory and management practice [71]. Although research consistently links human behavior to organizational performance, translating these insights into actionable leadership strategies remains a central challenge [44]. Accordingly, leadership ineffectiveness can be examined across three interacting levels — universal, contextual, and organizational. At the universal level, ineffectiveness stems from human vulnerabilities and cognitive biases that transcend context. At the contextual level, it arises when leader behaviors misalign with situational or cultural demands. At the organizational level, structural norms, incentives, and systems may either perpetuate or correct these patterns. Collectively, these perspectives reveal that ineffective leadership is not a matter of individual deficiency but a misalignment across human, relational, and systemic dimensions. The following sections examine each level in turn.

Universal Approach to Ineffective Leadership

Universal theories conceptualize leadership effectiveness as stable and leader-centered, assuming certain traits, behaviors, or outcomes predict success across contexts [74,106]. Early trait models emphasized inherent characteristics such as charisma, confidence, and decisiveness that distinguished effective leaders [65,94]. Behavioral theories shifted focus to observable actions, such as task orientation or relationship building [33]. Although these approaches advanced leadership science, they often oversimplified effectiveness into a single “best” way to lead, neglecting relational, contextual, and systemic dimensions [17]. Outcome-based models reinforced this pattern by inferring ineffectiveness from poor results, regardless of situational constraints [50]. Collectively,

these approaches remain influential in research and practice for their predictive value and empirical consistency [36]. However, by privileging stable traits and outcomes, they risk theoretical rigidity and practical oversimplification [5,107]. Behaviors effective in one context, such as decisiveness in crisis, may be counterproductive in another that values collaboration. Moreover, a narrow focus on outcomes can obscure underlying harm, including burnout, disengagement, and psychological unsafety [98]. Psychological perspectives expanded the universal view by exploring cognitive and emotional processes. Emotional intelligence emphasized leaders' capacity for self-regulation and empathy [39,40] while research on narcissism and bias revealed vulnerabilities that undermine performance [50]. Similarly, frameworks such as Leader-Member Exchange [41] and Transformational-Transactional Leadership [10] sustained universalist logic by assuming broad cross-context applicability, even within relational models. Ultimately, universal theories reveal a paradox: no singular trait, style, or outcome guarantees effectiveness. Leadership failure arises not solely from individual deficits but from misalignment between leader behavior, contextual demands, and follower needs [31]. As failures increasingly reflect *contextual misfit* rather than incompetence, scholarship has shifted toward situational and crisis leadership, emphasizing adaptive capacity and alignment with changing environments [14,66,97,105]. This evolution sets the stage for contextual approaches, which view leadership as dynamic, relational, and embedded within complex organizational systems.

Contextual Approach to Ineffective Leadership

Context is not a passive backdrop but an active force shaping leadership interactions, decisions, and outcomes [106]. It determines how leader behavior is interpreted, how followers respond, and how effectiveness emerges or deteriorates. Leadership, therefore, is best understood as a dynamic, relational process embedded within situational, cultural, and organizational conditions [74]. While universal models emphasize stable traits, contextual approaches highlight adaptability — the alignment between leader behavior, follower needs, and environmental demands [29,48]. Research consistently shows that crises and failures often arise less from individual incompetence than from contextual misfit, where structural, cultural, or relational conditions constrain effective action [52,93,97]. Leadership effectiveness is thus contingent and fluid: what succeeds in one setting may be ineffective or even unethical in another [21,76]. Foundational models such as Contingency Theory [29] and Situational Leadership [47] beautifully capture the importance of fit between leader style and situational favorableness, while later frameworks — Relational Leadership Theory [100,102] and Followership Theory [76] — emphasize the social co-construction of leadership through ongoing leader-follower interactions. Followers act as moral and functional evaluators whose engagement or resistance can either sustain or disrupt ineffective leadership [62]. Complexity and Systems Theories expanded this view by framing leadership as adaptive behavior within dynamic, nonlinear environments [101]

while cross-cultural research [49,52] demonstrated that leadership effectiveness varies with cultural norms and follower expectations. Organizational psychology complements these insights by explaining how stress, motivation, and emotional regulation shape leaders' capacity to adapt under contextual pressures [40]. In essence, the contextual approach reframes ineffectiveness as misalignment rather than deficiency. Leadership failure emerges when leaders fail to recognize or respond to the evolving demands of their environment. By emphasizing adaptability, relational awareness, and moral accountability, contextual approaches bridge the gap between individual competence and systemic understanding — linking directly to organizational perspectives that explore how structures and culture sustain or correct such failures.

Organizational Approach to Ineffective Leadership

Whereas universal and contextual approaches emphasize human tendencies and situational contingencies, the organizational approach foregrounds the structural and cultural systems that shape leadership effectiveness [77]. Ineffective leadership is not solely the result of individual deficits or contextual pressures; it also stems from organizational conditions that reinforce maladaptive behaviors, silence dissent, and prioritize short-term gains over long-term well-being [26,52]. Within organizations, culture, structure, and policy form the framework guiding leadership behavior. Organizational culture defines shared values and norms; structure establishes hierarchies and communication pathways; and policy delineates decision-making and accountability [74]. When leaders align their approach with these contextual elements, engagement and innovation flourish. When misalignment occurs, such as when a rigid leadership style conflicts with an adaptive culture or decentralized structure, ineffectiveness emerges [35]. This contextual misfit represents a systemic disconnect between leader behavior and organizational demands rather than a failure of individual traits. From a systems perspective, leadership failures reflect broader organizational dysfunctions that propagate through hierarchies [2,101]. Ineffectiveness persists where organizations suppress feedback, inhibit learning, and reinforce defensive routines. Structural flaws, such as unclear roles, over-centralization, or reward systems that encourage competition over collaboration, further exacerbate failure [98]. Structural and cultural theories deepen this view, revealing how weak accountability systems, permissive structures, or toxic cultures enable leadership failure. The toxic triangle model [80] illustrated how destructive leadership arises from the convergence of destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. Organizations characterized by instability, ambiguous norms, or cultures of silence are particularly vulnerable to such dynamics. Similarly, the abusive supervision cycle [96] demonstrated how tolerance for hostility normalizes abuse and erodes accountability. Organizational culture theory [28,88] revealed how shared values and artifacts institutionalize either constructive or destructive practices.

Research on psychological safety highlights the protective role of culture. Edmondson (2019) [25] found that psychologically safe environments reduce the persistence of ineffective leadership by empowering employees to raise concerns and suggest improvements. Conversely, climates of fear or hypercompetition amplify leadership failure through stress, burnout, and disengagement [92]. Studies on engaging leadership further reinforce this view, demonstrating that when leaders foster need satisfaction and connection, engagement and performance improve [87]. Ineffective leadership, conversely, can be conceptualized as *disengaging leadership*, producing the opposite effects of diminished engagement, unmet needs, and organizational dysfunction. As organizational theorists emphasize, leadership must be examined through multi-frame and pluralist perspectives that capture its systemic complexity [77]. Organizational theory thus provides a meta-theoretical lens for understanding leadership as a dynamic, interconnected phenomenon. Universal models illuminate traits and behaviors, and contextual approaches explain situational dynamics, yet both often overlook how structures and systems sustain or constrain effectiveness. The organizational approach integrates individual, relational, and systemic variables, revealing how misalignment among leader capability, organizational context, and follower needs produces persistent patterns of ineffectiveness.

Systemic Definition of Ineffective Leadership

Ineffective leadership is a dynamic, multi-level phenomenon in which leaders fail to meet individual, relational, and organizational needs due to deficits rooted in universal human tendencies, situational contingencies, and systemic organizational structures. It emerges when leaders' cognitive, emotional, or behavioral limitations (universal), interacting with contextual demands and constraints (contextual), are reinforced or left uncorrected by organizational cultures, systems, and institutional logics (organizational).

This definition positions ineffective leadership as a systemic failure rather than a narrow deficit in individual traits or skills. At the universal level, inherent human vulnerabilities, such as cognitive biases, emotional dysregulation, or limited self-awareness, predispose leaders to recurring forms of ineffective behavior across contexts [50,61]. At the contextual level, situational pressures and relational dynamics, including crises, resource constraints, or cultural norms, may amplify or mitigate these vulnerabilities, making ineffectiveness contingent on the alignment between leader behavior and environmental demands [29]. At the organizational level, systemic structures and cultures can either sustain or correct ineffective leadership: toxic cultures, misaligned incentives, and poor feedback mechanisms perpetuate dysfunction, whereas psychologically safe and learning-oriented systems foster renewal and growth [25,80,87,88]. This integrated framework redefines effectiveness as a dynamic process rather than a fixed trait [35]. Ineffectiveness thus reflects the interaction among leader vulnerabilities, contextual contingencies, and systemic conditions,

not merely “bad leaders” or adverse situations. Addressing entrenched leadership failure requires attention to both individual and structural contributors.

Compassion as a Corrective and Disruptive Mechanism

Within this systemic understanding of ineffective leadership, compassion functions as a corrective and transformative mechanism capable of interrupting dysfunctional relational patterns and supporting renewal. By enabling leaders to recognize distress, respond with attuned presence, and create conditions that counteract interpersonal and structural dysfunction, compassion reintroduces connection and psychological safety into strained systems. This establishes compassion not merely as an interpersonal virtue but as a foundational mechanism of disruption — one that prepares the conceptual ground for a more formal articulation of how compassion operates across multiple levels of leadership systems. Having established compassion as a corrective force, the next subsection identifies a critical gap in existing scholarship and explains why a formal model of compassion-based disruption is needed.

Theoretical Gap and the Need for an Integrated Disruption Model

Although compassion has been examined across multiple leadership frameworks, no formally articulated Integrated Disruption Model currently exists within the scholarly literature. *Benevene, Buonomo and Fiorilli* (2022) [11] demonstrated that compassion is a critical, evidence-based factor for organizational health and performance, and that organizations can intentionally cultivate it to improve well-being, engagement, and outcomes. *Dutton, Workman, and Hardin* (2014) [24] similarly positioned compassion as a vital, measurable, and embeddable interpersonal process in organizations, with significant benefits for individuals and the workplaces. Compassionate leadership, as *Hougaard and Gest-McCall* (2021) [51] argued, requires balancing care with courage — enabling leaders to address difficult situations without sacrificing humanity. Even so, compassion should be conceptualized as a structured, multi-level mechanism of disruption. This absence reveals a meaningful theoretical gap: while compassion is widely recognized as a relational, contextual, and neurobiologically grounded leadership capacity [24,51] its functional role in interrupting maladaptive leadership patterns has not been systematically modeled. The Integrated Disruption Model introduced in this article therefore represents a novel contribution, offering the first framework to explain how compassion disrupts ineffective leadership through coordinated neurobiological regulation, contextual responsiveness, and relational integrity. By positioning compassion as an active mechanism of disruption rather than a passive interpersonal virtue, the model advances leadership theory and provides a structured foundation for future empirical testing. With the theoretical gap established and the need for a formal model clarified, the following subsection examines how compassion functions as a multi-level disruptive force within

leadership systems.

Disrupting Ineffective Leadership through Compassion

A central question remains: *How can ineffective leadership be disrupted?* If ineffectiveness is multi-level and dynamic, disruption must operate with similar complexity. Compassion offers a powerful, yet underutilized, mechanism for disruption [79,86,99]. While historically rooted, compassionate leadership is both timely and essential [51] though its definitions remain scattered and fragmented (*Ramachandran et al., 2023*) [84]. *Since Frost's* (1999) [34] foundational work, research has positioned workplace compassion as an alternative to traditional motivation- and logic-driven management models [43]. *Hougaard and Gest-McCall* emphasized that compassion differs from empathy by emphasizing action to alleviate suffering rather than emotional absorption, which can overwhelm leaders. They outlined four core practices — caring presence, caring courage, caring directness, and caring transparency — that help leaders navigate high-pressure environments while strengthening trust, psychological safety, and performance. Compassion goes beyond kindness or empathy; it is an interpersonal process involving recognition of suffering, emotional resonance, sense-making, and action to alleviate [11,24]. In practice, it fosters trust, psychological safety, and mutual accountability [43,91] conditions that directly disrupt ineffective leadership patterns. Empirical evidence supports these effects. Compassionate leaders enhance collaboration, reduce emotional exhaustion and absenteeism, and strengthen perceptions of leader competence and effectiveness [99,104]. By legitimizing distress, acknowledging hidden harms, and promoting accountability, compassion counters silencing mechanisms that sustain ineffective leadership [79,91]. When embedded into culture, policy, and leadership development, compassion promotes resilience, continuous learning, and systemic improvement [7,51].

The disruptive potential of compassion operates across three interconnected levels:

- Universal: Compassion reflects a fundamental human response to suffering; reframing leadership as grounded in shared humanity rather than authority [24].
- Contextual: It mitigates situational barriers, such as power distance, crises, or cultural norms, by normalizing vulnerability and open dialogue [79].
- Organizational: Compassion can be institutionalized through structures and practices that enhance psychological safety, collective efficacy, and long-term performance [24].

Practicing compassionate leadership involves deliberate actions — active listening, providing support during adversity, and creating spaces for reflection and feedback [51]. By embracing compassion across universal, contextual, and organizational levels, leaders can disrupt not only isolated failures but the systemic conditions that perpetuate them. Ultimately, compassionate leadership offers a complementary and actionable framework for transforming

ineffectiveness into resilience. By cultivating environments where individuals feel supported, valued, and empowered, organizations can strengthen trust, voice, and well-being while fostering collective efficacy and sustainable success. The following

comparative table (4.1) outlines the three approaches, highlighting their core assumptions, strengths, limitations, contributions to understanding ineffectiveness, and compassion-based disruption strategies (Table 1).

Table 1: Approaches to Understanding Leadership and Ineffectiveness.

Approach	Core Assumptions / Focus	Strengths	Limitations	Contribution to Understanding Ineffectiveness	Compassion-Based Disruption Strategy
Universal (Trait/Behavioral)	Effectiveness depends on stable leader traits, styles, and behaviors (e.g., decision-making, emotional regulation)	Provides foundational insights into individual qualities and common leader competencies	Overemphasizes individual traits; neglects situational and systemic factors	Identifies when leaders lack baseline skills or attributes necessary for performance	Foster leader self-awareness and empathy; normalize vulnerability; train leaders in emotional recognition and response
Contextual (Relational/Systems)	Effectiveness emerges from interactions between leaders, followers, and situational variables (power dynamics, crises, cultural norms)	Recognizes adaptability, shared meaning, and the importance of situational fit	May overlook structural or organizational constraints that limit leader effectiveness	Explains why a leader is effective in one environment and may fail in another due to contextual misalignment	Encourage open communication, active listening, and mutual accountability; normalize feedback and expression of distress
Organizational (I/O Psychology & Systems)	Effectiveness is shaped by alignment among leader capacity, organizational systems, and follower needs	Integrates psychological, managerial, and systemic perspectives; links leadership to performance and organizational outcomes	Requires multi-level analysis; complex to apply	Reveals how systemic misalignment (e.g., strategy, culture, structure) contributes to persistent ineffectiveness escalating to bad leadership	Institutionalize compassion through policies, leadership development, reward systems, and cultural norms; embed psychological safety and collective resilience

Conclusions

This discussion is both analysis and testimony: a convergence of scholarship and lived experience in pursuit of understanding why bad leadership persists and how its cycle can be disrupted. Ineffective leadership is not merely the absence of effectiveness or competence; it is a multifaceted phenomenon with real and wide-ranging consequences [38,82]. Even with its profound consequences, the dynamics of bad leadership, as ineffectiveness, remain significantly underexplored [64,70,97]. My engagement with this topic is deeply personal, driven by the paradox of tolerance and compliance: why followers and organizations remain silent in the presence of bad leadership. My early research examined the harm inflicted on followers, particularly those silenced by fear of reprisal, reputational damage, or retaliation. Yet fear alone does not explain collective acquiescence. I found myself haunted by the very questions that animate *Kellerman's* scholarship (2024a; 2024b) [64]: *Why do we tolerate bad leaders? Why do we fail to stop them? Why do we so often look away from the broad ranges and progressive phases of bad leaders?*

In an era of uncertainty, disconnection, and eroding trust, these questions are no longer rhetorical [20]. Burnout has become a breaking point rather than a buzzword. Leadership cannot be reduced to individual heroics or defined as the “absence of effectiveness;” it is inherently contextual, shaped by the interplay of leaders, followers, and systems [57]. Ineffectiveness exists along a continuum — from subtle rigidity or neglect to catastrophic failures that endanger safety, trust, and resilience. Universal models too

often overlook the structural and relational conditions that allow failure to persist.

This article advances a systemic definition of ineffective leadership and proposes an integrative approach to disrupting its cycle. Doing so requires reframing compassion, kindness, and authenticity not as idealistic traits but as strategic imperatives [54]. By modeling and prioritizing these values, leaders can create cultures of trust, psychological safety, and accountability that challenge toxic norms and foster constructive dissent. Compassionate leadership reduces fear, encourages transparency, and empowers followers with moral courage to raise concerns — making it far less likely for harmful patterns to persist unchecked. Moreover, these qualities enhance adaptability, resilience, and learning, providing the foundation for sustainable effectiveness in complex environments.

In closing, the very complexity that has made leadership so elusive in scholarship and practice also provides the key: reimagining leadership through the lens of our shared humanity is not just an ethical aspiration, it is a practical necessity. Embracing compassion, kindness, and authenticity as core to leadership practice offers a path to disrupt the cycle of bad leadership. Thus, the discussion comes full circle to leadership's ancient and enigmatic core, inviting final questions worth our deepest consideration for those who offer compassion sparingly: in a world where leadership remains elusive and profoundly human, what is the real risk in treating others with compassion, what might we see if we had the courage to lead with it, and what might we ultimately understand about leadership itself if we stopped mistaking compassion for softness and recognized it

as the disciplined strength that anchors the human core of leading? Knowing the measurable benefits of compassionate and effective leadership, what will it take for us to abandon the illusion that “nothing is broken” and finally repair leadership by reclaiming the very element we have allowed to erode — our shared humanity? And if compassion strengthens rather than softens leadership, what will it take for us to confront the deeper truth: that real failure is not in leading with humanity, but in forgetting that humanity is the core of leadership itself.

Dedications

I dedicate this work to my mother, whose quiet strength and unwavering compassion shaped every part of who I am. She taught me that leadership is rooted in humanity—choosing integrity when it is not convenient, extending kindness even when circumstances are difficult, and treating every person with dignity. Her example of love remains the foundation of my mission and my faithful compass.

I also dedicate this to my niece, who has stepped into motherhood with grace, courage, and tenderness. Compassion strengthened our relationship through triumphs and tribulations (truthfully, perhaps more tribulations than triumphs) but it was within those difficult moments that our connection deepened. Honesty and transparency became the foundation of our bond, allowing us to show up for each other in ways that were authentic, vulnerable, and profoundly human. Watching her raise her children has expanded that bond even further, reminding me of the profound influence of compassion carried through our family roots, a continuum that nurtures each generation and shapes the future we hold in our hands.

I extend this dedication to my brother, who taught me some of the most valuable lessons about compassion—every human being deserves dignity and understanding. Although our systems remain miles behind in their ability to comprehend mental health and traumatic brain injuries, my compassion was truly tested in those moments. Those challenges to my patience, my resilience, and my ability to love unconditionally became real. I will continue striving for more trauma-informed and compassion-informed leadership in our systems. Just as leadership can seem simple under ideal conditions, so can kindness and compassion. But we are tested when those conditions are not ideal—when systems fail, when circumstances strain us, and when our integrity, values, and character are pushed to their limits. Those experiences continue to inform my work and deepen my commitment to rehumanizing leadership.

And woven into this tapestry of compassion as a disruption framework, I cannot forget my support—the ones who restore what life often depletes. As a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP), I feel deeply; my energy, my love, my optimism, and my joy can be worn thin by the emotional landscapes I navigate. My heightened emotional intelligence allows me to connect with others in profound and meaningful ways, yet it also means I absorb more than most. This sensitivity is a gift passed down from my grandmother and my mother, a lineage of emotional depth that has shaped my ability to understand and care for others. But like all gifts, it comes with a profound reminder of how vulnerable true connection can be. For

those who love me, thank you for anchoring my mission. You remind me of the resonant and quiet power of connection and the way compassion can be renewed through the presence of someone who sees you clearly and cares without condition. For that, I am endlessly thankful.

Their influence is woven into every framework I create, international endeavor I undertake, course I teach, person I care for, and day of my work devoted to rehumanizing leadership. Compassion is not an abstract ideal; it is a legacy—one I am committed to carrying forward with integrity, faith, and love. As so timelessly declared in 1 Corinthians 13:7, *love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*”

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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