



WHY SELF-COMPASSION IS THE LEADERSHIP HACK EVERYONE HAS BEEN LOOKING FOR

Massimo Backus

A few years ago, I was the global head of leadership development for a prestigious consulting firm.

Despite outward success, I felt a gnawing sense of inadequacy. The harder I pushed myself to excel, the more I was haunted by a relentless inner critic. In a moment of self-awareness, I realized I was not following the leadership models I was teaching everyone else. So I decided to embark on a rigorous process of self-evaluation.

I underwent a 360-degree feedback assessment, and the results were brutal. Colleagues and supervisors described me as driven and intelligent, but also as defensive, authoritarian, and difficult to work with. The feedback was a harsh mirror reflecting all the traits I had tried to hide. I felt exposed and deeply ashamed. But it was in that raw, exposed state that I found the seeds of change.

In that moment of desperation, overwhelmed by the weight of my own expectations and the relentless inner critic that never seemed to relent, I placed my hand on my heart and told myself, "It's okay, I'm here for you." That simple act was an epiphany. It was the first time I felt a genuine sense of self-acceptance. The tight knot of anxiety in my chest began to loosen, and for the first time in a long while, I felt a profound sense of peace and understanding towards myself.

That moment of intense vulnerability led me on a journey of self-discovery and ultimately, to the transformative power of self-compassion. This process, detailed in my book *Human First, Leader Second: How Self-Compassion Outperforms Self-Criticism*, taught me that self-compassion is the leadership hack everyone has been looking for.

THE SELF-COMPASSION EPIPHANY

Self-compassion was an epiphany for me because it fundamentally altered my approach to leadership and personal well-being. For years, I had equated success with relentless self-criticism and perfectionism, believing that being hard on myself was the only way to achieve high performance. This belief system led to immense stress, a constant sense of inadequacy, and, ultimately, a panic attack that forced me to reevaluate my life.

The realization that self-compassion could be a source of strength, rather than a weakness, was revolutionary. It shifted my mindset from one of harsh self-judgment to one of kindness and understanding. This change allowed me to build resilience, improve my emotional intelligence, and foster a more supportive and effective leadership style.

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Self-compassion is a choice, but making this choice requires three key steps: self-awareness, self-acceptance, and personal accountability. These steps involve recognizing and understanding our emotions and triggers, accepting our imperfections without judgment, and holding ourselves accountable in a kind and constructive manner. Embracing these steps transforms self-compassion from a mere concept into a practical and powerful tool for leadership and personal growth. This epiphany not only enhances personal well-being but also creates a positive and productive organizational culture.

THE FOUNDATION OF SELF-COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP

As outlined above and in much greater detail in my book, self-compassionate leadership is built on three core components: self-awareness, self-acceptance, and personal accountability. These elements, when integrated, create a powerful framework for personal and professional growth.

SELF-AWARENESS | Self-compassion begins with self-awareness—nonjudgmental recognition of our internal states, emotions, strengths, and weaknesses. This self-awareness is about knowing our strengths, embracing our limitations, and understanding our triggers.

Self-awareness requires us to be constantly curious about our experiences and why we react the way we do. This continuous self-inquiry helps leaders understand their true selves, leading to more authentic and effective leadership.

SELF-ACCEPTANCE | The second component of self-compassionate leadership is self-acceptance. Self-acceptance involves recognizing our imperfections and limitations without judgment. It's about understanding that being human means being flawed and that these flaws do not diminish our worth or potential.

Self-acceptance allows leaders to create a safe space for themselves and their teams, where mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth rather than failures to be punished.

PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY | The final component is personal accountability. Self-compassionate leaders hold themselves accountable not by harsh self-criticism, but by committing to personal growth and improvement. Personal accountability in this context means taking responsibility for our actions and their impact on others while being kind and supportive of ourselves. This approach fosters a culture of continuous learning and resilience within organizations.

Self-compassion liberates leaders from chasing external validation, temporary fixes, and coping mechanisms and reorients to why they wanted to be a great leader all along.



SELF-COMPASSION AS A LEADERSHIP HACK

Leaders constantly look outside themselves for the latest tools, gurus, and performance apps to boost their sense of control, authority, and status. The solution they are seeking is already inside of them. They just don't see it because they are so focused on the external. If they were to pause and have an honest conversation with themselves they would begin to realize that self-compassion's impact on leadership is profound and multifaceted, making it the ultimate leadership hack:

ENHANCED EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE | Self-compassionate leaders are more emotionally intelligent. They are better equipped to manage their emotions and respond to the emotions of others with empathy and understanding. This emotional intelligence strengthens relationships within the team and enhances overall organizational cohesion.

INCREASED RESILIENCE | Leaders who practice self-compassion are more resilient in the face of challenges. They can bounce back from setbacks with a positive outlook and a commitment to learning from their experiences. This resilience not only benefits the leader but also sets a powerful example for the entire organization.

IMPROVED DECISION-MAKING | Self-awareness and self-acceptance enable self-compassionate leaders to make more informed and balanced decisions. By understanding their own biases and limitations, they can approach problems with a clearer perspective and a greater openness to diverse viewpoints. This leads to better decision-making processes and outcomes.



HIGHER LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT AND PRODUCTIVITY | Self-compassionate leadership fosters a supportive and inclusive work environment where employees feel valued and understood. This leads to higher levels of engagement and productivity, as team members are more motivated to contribute their best efforts when they feel psychologically safe.

REDUCED BURNOUT AND INCREASED WELL-BEING | By embracing self-compassion, leaders can significantly reduce their own stress and prevent burnout. This not only improves their personal well-being but also enhances their capacity to support and lead their teams effectively. A leader who takes care of themselves is better equipped to take care of their team.

FOSTERING INNOVATION | A culture of self-compassion encourages risk-taking and innovation. When leaders model self-compassion, they create an environment where employees feel safe to experiment, fail, and learn. This openness to failure and learning is essential for fostering creativity and innovation within the organization.

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PERFECTION IS AN ILLUSION

Despite its many benefits, self-compassion is often viewed negatively in the business world. This bias stems from deeply ingrained social conditioning and traditional views on leadership that equate strength with toughness and vulnerability with weakness.

THE MYTH OF THE INVULNERABLE LEADER | Traditional leadership models glorify the idea of the invulnerable leader—someone who is always confident, decisive, and unyielding. This stereotype is reinforced by cultural narratives that associate leadership with power and control. In this context, self-compassion is mistakenly seen as a sign of weakness, indulgence, or lack of resolve.

FEAR OF APPEARING SOFT | Leaders often fear that showing self-compassion will make them appear soft or unfit to handle the rigors of leadership. This fear is rooted in the belief that toughness and self-criticism are necessary for achieving high performance and maintaining authority. As a result, many leaders resort to harsh self-criticism and relentless pressure to meet unrealistic expectations.

BIAS TOWARD PERFECTIONISM | The business world frequently rewards perfectionism and a relentless pursuit of success. Leaders are expected to push themselves and their teams to the limit, often at the expense of personal well-being. This leaves little room for self-compassion or a more balanced and sustainable approach to growth and achievement.

MISUNDERSTANDING OF SELF-COMPASSION | There is also a misunderstanding of what self-compassion entails. It is often confused with self-pity or complacency. In reality, self-compassion involves taking a proactive stance toward one's well-being and growth, recognizing mistakes as learning opportunities, and fostering a resilient mindset.

A STORY OF COACHING SELF-COMPASSION

One of the most profound experiences I had as a coach was working with a CEO of a mid-sized tech company. He was brilliant, driven, and had built his company from the ground up. However, he was also incredibly hard on himself, believing that self-criticism was the only way to maintain his edge. His relentless self-criticism started to affect his health and his relationships with his team.

In a world that often equates leadership with perfection and relentless drive, self-compassion offers a refreshing and transformative alternative.

During one of our sessions, I introduced him to the concept of self-compassion. Initially, he was skeptical. "If I'm not hard on myself, won't lose my edge?" he asked.

I shared my personal journey and how self-compassion had transformed my leadership style and overall well-being. We explored how self-compassion didn't mean lowering standards but rather approaching oneself with the same kindness and understanding one would offer a close friend.

I guided him through a mindfulness exercise, encouraging him to acknowledge his feelings without judgment and to treat himself with kindness. Over time, he began to see the benefits. His stress levels decreased, he became more approachable, and his team noticed a positive change in his demeanor. He was still driven and ambitious, but now he led with a balance of high expectations and self-compassion, creating a more supportive and productive work environment.

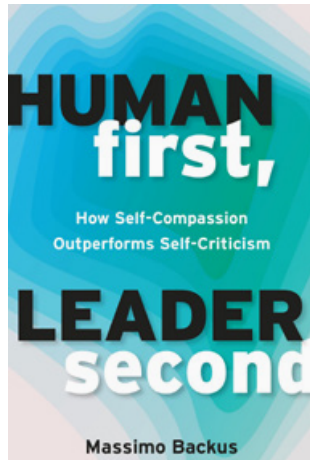
CONCLUSION

In a world that often equates leadership with perfection and relentless drive, self-compassion offers a refreshing and transformative alternative. By embracing self-awareness, self-acceptance, and personal accountability, leaders can create a more humane and effective approach to leadership. Self-compassion liberates leaders from chasing external validation, temporary fixes, and coping mechanisms and reorients to why they wanted to be a great leader all along.

My book delves deeper into these concepts and provides practical guidance for leaders at all levels. It is a resource for anyone seeking to harness the power of self-compassion in their growth as a human and as a leader. As we continue to navigate the complexities of modern leadership, **let us remember that being human first and a leader second is not a weakness but a profound strength.** 📖



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Massimo Backus is a master facilitator, speaker, leadership coach, and the host of The Leadership Mind podcast. He has coached and consulted companies such as Amazon, Nintendo, Salesforce, Fox Entertainment, and Cisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology and a master's degree in Organizational Behavioral Psychology along with certifications and credentials in DISC, MBTI, Hogan Assessment, Korn Ferry Architect, Co-Active Coaching Certification, ORSC (Organization and Relationship Systems Coaching) Certification and is a Hoffman Process Graduate.

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