

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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## *Books*

### **Turning Empathy Inward**

By Monica C. Worline & Jane E. Dutton

Review by Beth Kanter

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## BOOKS

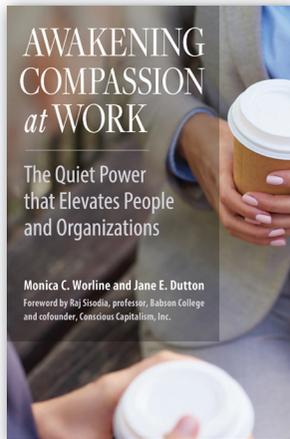
# Turning Empathy Inward

REVIEW BY BETH KANTER

**M**ost modern workplaces have become so impersonal and demanding that we've gotten desensitized to caring about coworkers. Many people who work for nonprofits suffer from passion fatigue and compassion burnout because they already have to give so much to those they serve that they have nothing left for fellow staff. *Awakening Compassion at Work*, by Monica Worline and Jane Dutton, is a compelling guide to rehumanizing workplaces with love. The book offers a road map for how to instill organizational culture with a deep sense of compassion—something that would make many organizations happier and healthier places to work.

In my 2016 book with Aliza Sherman, *The Happy Healthy Nonprofit: Strategies for Impact Without Burnout*, we offer a parallel framework for practicing self-care and creating a culture of well-being in the nonprofit workplace. The book looks at our relationships with ourselves, other people, careers and money, our environment, and technology—and shows how our relationships with people in our workplaces heavily influence our well-being.

Since the launch of our book, I've been teaching workshops for nonprofits on how to practice self-care and bring a culture of well-being into organizations. And I keep hearing the same questions and concerns: Inevitably, a younger nonprofit leader will come up and confide that everyone in the organization is on the cusp of burnout. Everyone works ridiculously long hours, feels under attack from breaking news, has too much work to do, and has too few resources. Sometimes they mention experiencing a loss of purpose for the mission that initially energized them. They are passionate about the organization's work, but they find it hard to continue while feeling devalued. These young leaders desperately want to change their organization's culture and not have to leave.



## **AWAKENING COMPASSION AT WORK: The Quiet Power That Elevates People and Organizations**

By Monica C. Worline and Jane E. Dutton  
251 pages, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017

This feedback aligns with Worline and Dutton's view that workplace culture often doesn't allow people to flourish, grow, and do their best work, and collectively prevents organizations from achieving high performance and impact. Employees may feel that they suffer from a lack of appreciation of their skills, being at the whim of managers who don't understand the difficulties of their work, and experiencing unreasonable work demands and deadlines and a constant feeling that their work is undervalued. Other forms of suffering come from employees' personal lives, and while these pressures don't originate in the workplace, they can contribute to the suffering at work.

In a pressure-cooker workplace, where always working is the culture, staff may not view doing something for another employee as a legitimate use of work time. They may not view personal crises, such as a colleague losing a home to a fire, as relevant to the work community, as they are too focused on deadlines. In a workplace that explicitly values employees' taking care of one another, on the other hand, staff might view helping a coworker as relevant to their work. As the authors conclude, compassion unfolds differently depending on the work culture, because that culture shapes what individuals notice, think, feel, and do. The book shows how, in this way, organizations' structures and processes can make it easier or harder to express compassion—not just at the interpersonal level but also at the organizational or systemic level.

**BETH KANTER** (@kanter) was named one of the most influential women in technology by *Fast Company* and is the award-winning author of the *Networked Nonprofit* books.

How can we make workplaces in general more compassionate? For Worline and Dutton, the answer in each environment is to define compassion as not just a passive emotion but also an active desire to alleviate suffering—a four-part process that involves noticing, understanding, feeling empathy, and taking action. As Sherman and I wrote in our book, potential ways to do this include organizational leaders establishing flexible work time, protecting employees from task overload, monitoring and checking in, and designing rituals and activities that can convey emotional support.

Based on the authors' extensive research, Worline and Dutton's book makes a strong case for why and how embedding compassion into an organization's culture is valuable, and how it can lead to extraordinary performance. Fostering psychological safety can increase innovation, build trust and respect that increases people's willingness to work together, improve service to stakeholders, and encourage greater collaboration, employee engagement, and talent development.

My only criticism of the book is that it might seem to portray compassion as a silver bullet that can fix everything that is wrong with modern workplaces. Although that is not the case, the book does make a strong case for why compassion is a vital ingredient for building resiliency within organizations. After all, as the saying goes, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast."

If you think compassion in the workplace only serves to appease hippies or to soften harsh corporate cultures driven by a profit motive, this book may make you think again. Nonprofit workers are experts at being compassionate to the people they serve. But they also need to practice compassion in their own offices. The authors make a good case for why there is no greater power or source of strength in the world than love. Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries—and nonprofits need to promote them not only among the communities they serve but also as part of their internal culture. ■