

#006 Let's Talk Compassionate Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Fireside Charla #6 with Dr. Adela de la Torre, president of SDSU where we prepare the global citizens, compassionate leaders and ethical innovators who will solve the world's greatest challenges.

Today, President de la Torre and Dr. Luke Wood, Chief Diversity Officer, chat with two of our student leaders to discuss Compassionate Leadership, a key pillar in President de la Torre vision for SDSU.

Fireside Charla Starts Now!

Adela: Today we're going to have a great discussion about compassionate leaders and what it means. We have three individuals in the room today who are going to share their ideas with us. So let's start with some brief introductions.

Ayesha: Hi everyone I'm a Ayesha Kosaka. I am a 3rd year here at San Diego State, majoring in interdisciplinary studies with an emphasis in film production, hospitality, and marketing.

Michael: Hello, my name is Michael Wiafe, I'm also a 3rd year political science major with a minor in honors interdisciplinary studies.

Luke: Hi, and I'm Luke Wood, and I'm serving as our chief diversity officer and Associate Vice President for faculty diversity and inclusion here at SDSU.

Adela: Great. So thank you so much for being here today. So let's start with the words compassionate leader. What does it mean to you?

Ayesha: I think compassion means to just really empathize with one another and understanding where someone is coming from and just really understanding the perspective outside of your own and I think that's something that we need, like something that needs to be focused on, especially when we're leading in general, regardless of whether you're focusing on compassionate leadership or not. I think just compassion is just an important element in our day-to-day lives, and just understanding each other and coming together as one.

Michael: That was great.

Ayesha: Thank you, thank you.

Michael: Um, if I were to add on a little bit, I'll expand a little bit more on taking yourself out of your own perspective and trying to put yourself in somebody else's view. This is really important because you don't know how somebody else is feeling. You don't know how something you said might have affected them. You don't know how your actions might affect them. So being a compassionate leader, I think is about taking in other people's perspectives and being able to relate to them, understanding that it's not your own but still being able to make a difference with them.

Luke: Yeah, I mean, there's not much to add. I think more so maybe on the leadership end of it is that you have to emphasize the importance of compassionate leadership because you can certainly have leadership that's not compassionate. I think, unfortunately, we see too many examples of that. And so emphasizing the importance of like you said, having empathy trying to see from the other person's perspective. I think that makes it very important.

Adela: You know, I think it's really easy when we talk about leadership to speak about leadership without the idea of using compassion as an important tool in leadership. So everything you say about really being self aware, not making assumptions, making sure that you can put yourself in their shoes is really relevant in terms of I think leadership today.

What do you think we need to do as a society to get people to begin to use that descriptor in leadership? Because I think what you're saying, Luke, is that too often we're not seeing that and what is it that we need to do here at San Diego State? What can we do to make sure that people are really putting that in the forefront as they move into leadership roles?

Ayesha: I think often times we just really have to rip the band aid off, we kind of tiptoe around certain situations. We don't know how someone else is going to feel. But I think if we come into a conversation just being transparent and understanding like, "Okay, this is not attacking the person." You know, a lot of times people take it to heart and take things emotionally. But I think we need to see it from an objective standpoint. And this is something that I'm learning in my classrooms as well, especially in Africana studies classes where we need to really just hear- we need to hear each other out and I think at this point in our society is not really happening and I think that's just one of the

things that we have to focus on is how do we start a conversation and just see each other eye-to-eye without pinpointing only certain pieces of the conversation instead of looking at it as a whole.

Michael: Yeah, once again, you got it perfectly right. So I'll expand a little bit more on what you what you brought up. I think using myself as an example when I first started my own leadership career, I guess I can call it, I found myself dealing with all the struggles of a leader but without telling the people that I'm with that these are the struggles I'm dealing with. And that made it so that they kind of didn't understand why I would do certain things or why I would avoid certain topics maybe just because I wasn't being honest with myself, with them. And at a point I got really frustrated, I remember it. And I was just honest with them. And once I told them exactly how I was feeling, why I wasn't able to implement some of their ideas, why we weren't able to take some of that into consideration, the environment of the group was immediately different.

Ayesha: It was a relief.

Michael: Exactly, it was a relief, it was like, "Okay, I got all of this off my chest, they now understand what I was going through as a leader and now they see me less of a demon that I was before." I'm a little bit more aggressive and just like "this is the way we do in this way we have to do it" and they didn't understand why I was saying that, and once I told them why I was saying it and we felt that way. I think just as a group, we were way more cohesive really able to understand each other and just being honest with our perspectives. I think too little do you see a leader being honest with their group or just saying, "you know what, this is what happened? I don't know how we're going to tackle this." I think the hardest thing to say as a leader is "I don't know." Because you're expected to know, nobody else is expected to know but you.

So I think that's one of the hardest things to say is, I don't know. And I think we walk into a conversation I might just say, "Hey yall, I just learned this yesterday." Like, I'm not an expert, but I could try to teach you what I know and start from there so that they know kind of what I'm experiencing as a leader. And I think that leaders that do that tend to be most comfortable with their group and their group is most comfortable with them.

Adela: Sorry, you know, I'm hearing about the vulnerability you need to show as a leader and how important it is and it's almost like today you don't even see that anymore. People have to be so tough and so decisive that in many ways people are afraid to really say the truth because you're gonna hit this wall, and that wall is this person who isn't going to listen and isn't going to listen to anyone who's who appears to

be weak. But it's actually, Michael, I think you're right on target. You know, you not only have to be self aware, but you have to be vulnerable and be willing to say, "Gee, I don't know," or "you know what, this is real tough for me. Can you help me out?" And I think that's part of leadership as well. What are your thoughts Luke?

Luke: Well, I think in terms of getting people on board, and basically embracing this notion, they have to see it because too often what they see is the exact opposite. They turn on the television, they can see a lot of examples of, of not being compassionate. And so I think that one of the ways that we can do that here is through what you're already doing, as president, you're demonstrating it, you're going out and you prioritize listening to people. Going from department to department, to student groups, to all these community organizations and sitting down and taking the time to actually hear them, I don't think there's anything you can do to demonstrate compassion more by actually just stopping and listening and taking in what people have to say, and seeing and really just being with them in that moment and listening to what they, what's important to them, what are the challenges they're facing, what are the things that are going well? But when you stop and do that, I think that that is one of the most important ways that we can teach people to do it is by modeling it in that way.

Ayesha: And one thing that I wanted to add on to what you're saying, because I think the important element that you brought up was coming face-to-face, because the time that we're living in right now, we're so accustomed to being dependent on our technology. And I think that's drifted us away in a sense from having that compassionate leadership because we're always constantly protected by our phones. And just, you know, just sharing our feelings more so of anger, rather than understanding where people are coming from through text messages, on Twitter, on Instagram, however it is, it definitely has its perks, but at the same time, I feel like it can kind of drift us away from our goal of actually sitting down and having these conversations face-to-face and I think being in that present moment like that like Dr. Luke Wood said, I think is really vital to pushing that conversation forward.

Michael: Right. I actually forgot to add it back to SDSU, I was just talking about leadership in general. I think here, and this is something that you've done fantastically President de la Torre, is that you are honest and you just say what it is.

Ayesha: Mmm-hmm.

Michael: And I think just putting it out on the table and just being like, "Oh, that's why we haven't done this" or "Oh, maybe we haven't done this before because of this." I

think like when I look back on our first year, we lived on the same floor together in Zura in the same wing a couple of doors down so we kind of have a very similar experience but we didn't understand why some of the university policies were the way that they were. We didn't get why we could only check in 2 people into Zura. We really like confused like what is all this?

Ayesha: It wasn't explained.

Micheal: It wasn't explained. All these rules that were put on us weren't explained. So then it puts students in a frustrating spot because then they think the university is trying to hold them back. They think that the university just being annoying. Once I started to talk to RAs and more housing leadership, they were just like, "Oh, yeah, because we have this one incident and blah, blah, blah." And I was like "Oh, that's why it was like that."

Ayesha: A simple explanation at times is all it needs and we don't even have that much, you know, and then just the divide just keeps growing.

Adela: I think, really, what's really important, again, with looking at leadership is that transparency and that communication. And I think, Michael, you really hit it on the nose, like Zura, here's a dormitory, you're coming in as an 18 year old with the idea that, "Gee, I'm free" and all of a sudden, "what, I can't bring in more than two people?" And you know, it shows, you know, a failure of communication on our part, not intentionally, and I don't want to ever say it's an intentional one, but oftentimes, you know, in our day-to-day business, we make assumptions that people know, but in reality, most people don't know and then they create a mythology that may not accurately reflect the institution. So leadership is admitting when somebody communicates "something isn't working well" and you need to listen to that and create the environment in which you can begin to communicate effectively about why things are the way they are, and maybe even consider changing that policy. And I think that makes it important because again, as you were saying earlier, it really requires us to be vulnerable and accept the fact that maybe we have something wrong. And it's okay to be wrong on something and move on.

So Luke, you know, you're doing a lot of work and trying to develop compassionate leaders through your role. It's a brand new role. Can you share with us what you're doing and your vision for making our environment one that really is focused on creating the kind of empathy and compassion and support, if you will, for the human spirit here on at SDSU?

Luke: Absolutely. So essentially, we have a number of different efforts and initiatives that are really designed to help advance diversity and inclusion and we think that that is a form of compassion, is to ensure that everyone feels like this is a an environment where they can come, they can feel comfortable, that they can feel valued and affirmed. And what we'd like to do is think about the first part of it is perceptions....

Understanding one another, understanding how we perceive one another and our own roles, dealing with tough topics, such as our biases, such as the kind of subtle forms of slight things that we might say to one another where we can really separate intent from impact. Someone can still have a good intent and have a bad impact with what they say.

And too often we see that. And then the second part of it beyond this processional piece is then the relational piece, right? Building relationships with other people, relationships that really have like three primary characteristics. First is trust, then mutual respect, and then authentic care. So trust is really just knowing that someone is really in your corner, really there for you, will be with you in those moments that you need. Mutual respect is really oftentimes just thinking about being someone who's open to conversation and willing to converse. And then authentic care. That's a tougher one for, I think, for most people to understand.

And in this conversation on compassionate leadership, it's obviously very important. But authentic care, I like to think about it as like a shared investment, or shared vested interest even, where if let's say that I'm working with Michael, and Michael and I are, you know, I'm passionate about seeing what happens to him.

So it's like, we're so interconnected in the way that if Michael does well, I will personally feel like I did well, like if he succeeds, if he hits the mark, if he reaches the goals that he wants to reach. But then on the flip side of that, if Michael doesn't do well, if he stumbles, if he falls, if he misses the mark, I'm going to personally feel like I didn't do well because I have that shared or vested interest in what is taking place with him.

So we're kind of using those principles to think about how we roll out our diversity inclusion work because we think that that's an important component of this perception and relational piece before we even get to practices, because you can get people practices, do this, do this, do that. But oftentimes you can unfortunately arm people to do more damage than good if you haven't gotten to those more base conditions that are more important. So as part of that, we created this, this team, in fact we had a launch

today, of our provost, professors of equity in education, and they're engaged in these topics. They're going into department meetings, division meetings, classrooms, and having conversations with faculty members in particular about, you know, biases and stereotypes and cultural competencies and understanding what it means to be a Hispanic serving institution.

We have built a series of different councils, an equity council, an inclusion council where we're bringing people together to have conversations and to learn about one another are doing around diversity inclusion, to have real meaningful looks at our data, identifying areas where we're doing well, but also areas where we could be doing better and then targeting our efforts on those areas we're not doing as well. And if that's campus climate, if that's retention, if that's success, essentially what we're doing is we're reaching those individuals who have been the most disaffected. And sometimes those are things that we've done here.

Sometimes those are things that have occurred in wider society before individuals have gotten here. But no matter what, as an institution that cares about people, that's compassionate, we have a responsibility to help lift up everyone who's within our organization.

Adela: So I think in many ways that we're focusing on the importance of diversity, inclusion, and creating the kind of future leadership that we want to see on this campus. And it not only affects, I think, the faculty it also affects the students. In your mind, how does this authentic caring affect you?

Ayesha: Heavy question. I feel like having the authentic- Well first of all, I feel like authenticity is something that you could genuinely feel through someone, in someone, and I feel like it's an emotion that you communicate with one another. And that's not something that you can hide or lie about, I personally feel like. And when you have that authenticity, I know a lot of times when I'm speaking to different professors, I know I want to gain that connection and get something out of this experience that I'm going through. And sometimes if I feel like they're just saying it, just to go through the motions,

I can feel that too, and I feel like that's part of you know, also being an empath per se, and just being able to feel that emotion. But I think that it makes such a huge impact because then you start to feel- it makes you feel I don't, I don't know the best way to put this, but it makes you feel like "can I do it to?" Like does this person, especially someone that's like above me, per se, like a professor or faculty, staff, whoever it is or a mentor, and I don't feel that emotion through them then it's kind of it makes me second

guess myself like maybe I'm not doing something right? Or I'm not necessarily going through what I have to go through. And it just makes people tense. And it makes people not really understand the direction that they're going because many times people can sense that.

Michael: So I mentioned before I'm studying political science. And in a lot of our courses in my experience, professors try to stay impartial, try to stay in the middle and I'm sitting there and I'm like, "okay, I can tell which way you're leaning. And I know you don't want to say it and you don't want to admit it, but I can see it." And I'd say that that's an example of being inauthentic. We can tell that you're leaning away but you're trying to teach it in a way that you don't.

I think I would prefer if I was sitting in class and the professor just said "hey, this is what I think however, this is what they think" and you know any student can be on either side of this issue.

I had this one professor (I'm actually taking him right now for political writing) and on day one of class he said, "politics can't be in the middle. Like that's not what politics is and I'm not teaching you how to be in the middle. I'm not telling you that I'm in the middle either, but I'm telling you to consider both sides and to look at both sides. And so we're gonna take a critical look at both sides but I know that each and every one of you will be on one side of each one and we're going to talk about that and we're going to be okay with that because that's what politics is."

And I was sitting there in class like "you know what? He just said what I've been learning this entire time but didn't know how to put it into words." I could feel the professors were trying to have class in a way that just wasn't right. It just didn't feel right. Because we're talking about issues where I might think one way and the student next to me might think another way. However, we won't talk about how we think different, we'll just talk about the issue. And then that makes it so when I'm sitting in class I'm trying to hide my viewpoint too.

So I'll just try to talk about the issue as a fact, but not about who I am as a person. And that made learning kind of a little different, a little bit more technical. When you're studying political science or like a field where you have to make your own conclusion, I think it's important for the professor to tell you that they've made their conclusion too, and that, you know, you're on your path to thinking the way that you want to think based on the information I'm providing you, but I've made mine and if you want to have a conversation about it- he made himself very open. If you want to have a conversation

about it, of course, we respect all points of views, but I don't expect you all to not have a point of view. That simple.

Ayesha: And I think that's really important too, especially in being in a university institution is to encourage those different, like different thought processes. And I think especially in the education system, I remember growing up in elementary and high school, I used to hate reading and writing. I enjoyed writing, but I didn't really enjoy reading because I was always told what my thought process and how I came to my conclusion was different. So I was immediately like, "Okay, I don't know how to read. I don't know how to comprehend anything like I don't, this isn't registering in my head." But then when I got to college, especially last semester, I took a creative writing course and my professor- we were all afraid to say what we had to say about a poem or whatever piece we were studying. And he was like, "it's okay to come up with different conclusions," as you were saying. And I think by encouraging that it does lead to the authenticity and people are more open to sharing "Well, this is what I think." But understanding that that is a personal opinion and dissecting it that way.

Adela: So I do think that there's some really important themes here. This authenticity really is critical, not only for students, also faculty, but it also is important for leaders. I mean, you can't really be a compassionate leader if you're not authentic about what you feel and what you do, and you can't really hold back on that because you want to show your vulnerability, you want to show when you don't know something. You also want to show when you have a strong core belief about something so that people who are working with you understand that, there's no ambiguity there and that's okay. It's okay to have a belief that may be conflictual in an environment as long as people know where you stand, and you also are open to the idea that people are going to have, you know, a respectful, you know, discussion about those issues. And that's important.

Now, going back to the theme of compassionate leadership, I think we've hit a lot of important areas. We've talked about vulnerability, we've talked about authenticity, we've talked about self awareness. Are there any other important themes that we haven't touched on when we talk about looking at compassionate leadership and what we want to see for our students? I mean, a real important thing for me is as our students graduate, it's not just getting the degree, it's that they are uniquely different. They're special, they're coming out with this this human capacity in their spirit to understand the importance of compassionate leadership. So what would be the important elements that you think are important for our students to walk away with when they graduate from SDSU as compassionate leaders?

Michael: I think I got one to start. And we were talking about it before this. But when I first got here, and I sat in my first classes, my view of all my classes were a certain way or my view on political science was a certain way. I thought everybody is going to be in there, all of you want to do law, all of you want to do this, this is what you care about. And then I remember for the first time people going around and saying what they were interested in about political science. And I was shocked because these were all things that I never thought was interesting about poli-sci, I thought it was annoying just to be completely honest, I think elections...not my thing.

I'm more about the policy and implementation all of that part. But I really had my eyes open to the diversity that is within just one thing that most people don't see as diverse. You could talk about a lot of different areas of studies that are like that: sociology. What about sociology? There's a lot of different aspects within that and I think that that's something that you don't realize before you sit in the class, in a classroom full of students that might look different from you with different points of views. A lot of people think about diversity as ethnic diversity or just the way you look. But it goes so much deeper.

Ayesha: So many layers.

Michael: So I think that here students definitely walk away with the idea that even though you might hear a certain word, that word might mean something to every single different person, it might mean something different, and that's something important to learn in an environment such as education.

Ayesha: Right. And also, I feel like another thing that's important when it comes to compassionate leadership. It's in the word itself. Passion. I feel like if you don't have a passion to do something, you're not going to have that urge to go out and help others and help push for a change or to you know, fight for progress. You know, and I think that by having that, I know Michael has it oh my goodness, he's top notch like hands down- he is so passionate about political science and it shows. He doesn't have to say that he's passionate about it, we can see it. We can see it when he speaks, when he comes home and speaks about, "let me tell you what happened today." And it makes me feel excited about the policies that he's implementing and the moves that he's making. It makes me excited too. So I think that bouncing off of each other based off of that passion, regardless of whether I'm not I'm like- I'm going to be completely honest, I'm not 100% into political science and I wasn't. But having Michael as a friend and hearing him he will, he will go on and on, I'm sorry I need to call you out.

Michael: It's true.

Ayesha: But at the same time, I'm always so grateful for it. Because I'm like, I'm still taking something out of this. And if you care about it, as a friend I need to care about it, this is something that I need to care about too and that's how you start to expand your knowledge on different things. I mean, our friend group, we have people in different majors and we have different tastes and a lot of other things, but understanding that they're so passionate about something and they're trying to lead in different ways. There's different ways to lead, you know, and it shows, but as long as you have that, like urge, "Okay, this is what I want to do. This is the goal that I have." I think that really takes you super far. Yeah.

Adela: And I think something that you said was really important that, well, many things that you said were very important. Passion is definitely there. But people lead differently and accepting difference in leadership, I think is critical. A compassionate leader will understand that when they're in the workplace, that leadership can be anywhere and it may not manifest in the way you express leadership, right? And that's probably the hardest things because we oftentimes want to mirror ourselves and sometimes that's not the best strategy when we talk about compassionate leadership. So Luke, what are your thoughts?

Luke: Well, it really goes with that, that idea of wanting to mirror ourselves. I mean, I think that we have to truly be inclusive because it's so easy to not be. And if we think about how we get to a point where an institution needs to diversify, like what has become so homogeneous that it hasn't really embraced that.

You know, oftentimes it's not done consciously, it's done because people have a different, very specific callings on their hearts. So like you have faculty members who come in and they're passionate about the certain types of communities because those are communities that resonate with them. And it's on their heart. And I really want to work with those students and help those students. And so they hire someone else who has a very similar community that's also on their heart. And they hired another person has this another similar community, that's also on their heart. And I think that as we move towards diversity inclusion, and we're bringing more people to the table, that we have to be thoughtful not to do the same thing: to bring in people who will have different hearts than we do for different communities so that we can really, you know, disperse how people are reached.

Part of that is also then modeling the kinds of dispositions towards others that we think are important. You know, if you think a lot of times, like the diversity inclusion, where people are like fearful, they're like fearful that it means "it's not me, it means it's going to replace me. Or it's not good for people who are like me." But that's only because the people who've done it before, that's how they ended up treating the groups that are disaffected. So it's important that as we come into an environment and continue to diversify and be inclusive, that we are thoughtful to not do the same things that led them to basically eliminate us. I mean, what we want to do is to bring it in and embrace it in a way where they feel included too. That's harder to do just because our natural inclination as humans is not to do that. But I think that our intentionality, if we are truly committed to being compassionate, it will lead us to doing that.

Adela: I would agree with you. I think that when we talk about compassionate leadership, it means having our students, having our faculty go beyond reproducing who they are because it is easy, it's much easier to surround yourself with like-minded people, but bringing people who are intellectually, emotionally, you know, in terms of all the different identity structures that we can think of are included in this conversation and welcoming them in that really genuine and authentic way because it has to be genuine, it has to be authentic... will make a big difference. And if our students can walk out and really model that behavior, then I think San Diego State will rank number one in the country in really doing something incredibly innovative and our students will be that wonderful product that will be the signature of San Diego State. So I take a minute and thank all of you today. This has been a great conversation on compassionate leadership. Again, really mind-opening in so many different ways. Thank you.

Luke, Ayesha, Michael: Thank you.

Adela: This is just the beginning of a longer conversation. It's part of the core values that we share here at San Diego State and you'll be hearing much more in the future. Thank you again.

INCLUDE CONCLUSION

Perette: Next month, we have a special treat in store for you. By popular demand, we bring you an encore presentation of President de la Torre's inauguration speech where she talks about her vision for the next chapter of SDSU. You can access transcripts, join the conversation, and connect with President de la Torre at SDSU.edu/FiresideCharla. This is Perette Godwin, proud alum, hoping that you are inspired to innovate and have some interesting Charlas of your own.

Narrator: *Fireside Charla* is recorded at KPBS studios. Our Senior Producer and Managing Editor is Maria Keckler, our Operations Manager is Lisa Morrisette, original music and editing is by SDSU student Kevin Krck. And for their help and creative input we give special thanks to: Tom Karlo, John Decker, Perette Godwin, Brittany Santos-Derieg, Luis Murillo, La Monica Everett-Haynes, Joyce Gattas, Michele LaGrandeur, Kelly Woodhouse, Jeff Ernst, Scott Hargrove, Sean Hawes, Ethan Garcia, Dan Montoya, Travis McCauley, Luke Wood, Coleen Geraghty, James Tarbox, James Frazee, Cory Marshall, Kao Saechao, Rudy Arias, Uriel Avila Zuniga, Katie May, Angela Odis Brawner, Seth Mallios, and to you for listening and sharing this podcast with others.

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