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Social Psychology
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The Day of Compassion

I decided to have my Day of Compassion on 17 August 2014. The date, which was two days after the official Day of Compassion of the class, was selected for a reason. It was on a Sunday, the start of the working week in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I needed a workday because my activity focused on the plight of migrant laborers—specifically, the manual laborers hired as street cleaners, janitors, and gardeners by government offices and private companies.

They are easy to spot: They wear blue coveralls and headscarves or helmets as uniforms, and to a man, they always carry their work tools around. Approximately 70% of these laborers are Bangladeshis, and the remaining 30% are Nepalese. Although they may look professional and well-protected in their uniforms, these laborers are at the bottom of any salary scale. On average, they only earn US\$4.00 a day or less. With pay like this, they can't afford much more than a piece of bread a day, washed down with a glass of water. Not bottled water, mind you, but tap water that may not even be clean or completely potable.

I have long looked at their plight and pitied them. I cannot imagine traveling so far from their home countries and working in a foreign land for a pittance. It makes you wonder what kind of life they had in their countries of origin to make them abandon that and lead a life like this, thousands of miles away. Because I define "compassion" as having sympathy and concern regarding the plight of others, I thought these laborers would be an ideal focus for my Day of Compassion.

I started by giving a sandwich, apple, and 500ml bottle of water to the laborer who cleans the area where I wait for my bus. I also gave him a few bills—enough to get a decent lunch later in the day. This was a government worker. When I entered into our company compound, I saw our own blue-clad laborers. There are five of them at any given time. Because it was within my authority, I had a water dispenser placed at a convenient location near their working area. They now have access to clean, safe water. I talked with our cafeteria concessionaire, and he agreed (for a full day, at least) to provide them with a tray of fruits free of charge. In the evening, the laborers were also permitted to bring home all the clean leftovers from the cafeteria.



This behavior was definitely not normal. Although I greet these laborers every day, they were surprised with what I did for them that day. It certainly made me feel better about myself, but the laborers did not take it entirely well. The Nepalese were a bit suspicious and cynical, and the Bangladeshis bordered on hostile.

Even then, from a personal perspective, I liked what I did and preferred my "Day of Compassion me" to my "everyday me." What I realized is that there's nothing preventing my "Day of Compassion me" from becoming my "everyday me." As predicted by self-perception theory, I inferred a compassionate disposition by watching myself behave kindly toward others.

Although the laborers may have viewed my actions with wariness, it led to a higher productivity from them for the rest of the week. Thus, treating them well not only made me feel good about myself—it led them return the gesture, thereby creating a cycle of reciprocity: I do good things for them, they want to do good things for me, and I, in turn, want to do good things for them again. In my view, there are no psychological costs associated with this sort of cycle. In fact, even the company benefits from having a cycle of reciprocity. There is still a need to convince the laborers that my actions were actually done with no return in mind, but I've been encouraged so far with the change in climate. We have to realize that these laborers are individuals who deserve to be treated with respect.



What is beautiful is that my coworkers responded to my actions positively and even went out of their way to provide food and physical assistance to the laborers, especially when doing work meant for their individual offices. Although my coworkers started out as observers, they, too, became actors as the day went on. In fact, some coworkers have even taken to "adopting" the laborers, and it is now common to see the laborers getting a good breakfast of sandwiches, milk, laban, juice, and of course, precious bottled water, paid for by my colleagues. In addition, several of us have now hired these laborers for various tasks, such as cleaning vehicles or houses, and we pay them above normal wages, which augments their meager income significantly.

Social Psychology Techniques and Principles

In carrying out these activities, I drew heavily from concepts and research discussed in the course. For example, I used the foot-in-the-door technique when I initially asked the cafeteria concessionaire to provide laborers with some fruit (a small request), and then followed this request with a much larger request to let the laborers bring home leftover food.

Similarly, I used the door-in-the-face technique with the company president. I began by asking the president if the laborers could receive a salary increase. After the idea was immediately shot down, I then asked if the laborers could have a water dispenser with a fresh gallon of water and a basket of free fruits at lunch each day. I also employed the "central route" to persuasion, and it seemed quite effective in convincing others to take up the cudgels for the laborers.

Since the Day of Compassion, attitudes and behavior have gradually become more aligned, and dissonance has declined on both sides. The laborers are now far less hostile, and there's a new culture in our company—a culture that I believe will be permanent. For instance, my colleagues and I now call the laborers by name: Amin, Hajji, Jendra, Nimal, Raj, Makato. The laborers don't yet remember all our names, but in my case, I am now Mario to them, not simply *Modir* (boss).

Perhaps the biggest change of all has been in company policy and philosophy. We are now seriously considering absorbing these laborers into our workforce. As regular employees, they would get better pay, better benefits (including medical benefits), and would be able to travel home yearly for 30 paid days to see their loved ones. Of course, such changes would entail costs in terms of training (none of them speak English well) and overall salary and benefits, but the fact that the company is even considering these changes is remarkable. These possibilities have come about because of the marked improvement in the laborers' job performance since the company became more compassionate.

Our company today, the community tomorrow! Who is to say what we can achieve in a year? What I know is compassion begets compassion. From where I sit, what I can see is that compassion tends to be contagious, and the more of us who catch it, the better this world will be.

