



The Neurology of Power™: Why Compassion Makes Governance Braver

By Suzanne Alleyne, Founder of Alleyne& and
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We are living and leading in strange times. Politics is polarised, resources are shrinking, and the pace of change feels relentless. In the middle of this, leaders and trustees are expected to hold vision, values, people, budgets, and futures while running on empty. Many of us are tired. Some of us are scared.

As leaders and those who govern, we are often seen as the ones who hold all the power. Yet if current politics and the challenges facing our sector show us anything, it is that we do not. The reality is more complex. We may carry responsibility, visibility, and expectation, but not always the resources or authority to act as others imagine. Understanding this gap between perception and reality is part of what makes leadership today so demanding and so human. Most of us are doing our best with what feels like too little time or not enough power. And yet, small power is still power.

This year's Governance Now conference is an invitation to remember that. To reconnect with your own agency, your ability to influence, to shape, to decide. Power does not only live at the top of the hierarchy; it is present in every interaction, every question asked, every "yes" or "no" spoken with integrity.

Power: the invisible force shaping everything

Power itself is neutral. It is neither good nor bad. In my research, I define power as the ability to influence how others think, feel, and behave, whether they want you to or not, and to have agency over your own thinking, feeling, and behaviour.

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Crucially, power is about how you affect others and how you use the power you hold within yourself. Neuroscience shows that power literally changes how our brains work. When people experience power, activity in the brain's mirror system – the network that helps us tune into other people's feelings – can decrease. The more power we feel, the greater the risk of social distance, and the harder it becomes to stay connected and empathetic.

But that process is not fixed. The brain is plastic and capable of change. Empathy, compassion, and self-awareness can be trained like muscles. We can rewire our responses, and through leadership and governance, influence how others show up too.

From empathy to compassion

Empathy helps us understand others, but it does not demand action. That is why I often say, with Croydon honesty, empathy without action is bull\$hit!

For today's conversation, think simply:

- Sympathy is feeling *for* someone.
- Empathy is feeling *with* someone.
- Compassion is empathy *plus* action.

When leaders treat compassion as a core skill, they move from recognising struggle to responding in ways that build safety, trust and impact. Neuroscience backs this up. Compassion training can shift leadership behaviour, improve wellbeing, and may even change brain structure.

Yet many leaders have remarkably little compassion for themselves. We got here by working harder, faster, longer, not by being gentle with ourselves. So if we have never learned self-compassion, how can we truly show it to others? What would it look like to govern bravely from a place of compassion rather than depletion?

The brain of governance

Your brain's most important job is not thinking. It is regulation. It constantly predicts what you will need to survive and adjusts your internal budget of energy, attention, and emotion. Neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett calls this allostasis or 'body budgeting'.

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When you are leading - making decisions, absorbing pressure, holding people, you are budgeting not just for yourself but for everyone around you. Your tone in a meeting, your body language and your ability to stay calm or react quickly all feed into the body budgets of those you lead.

The brain does not know the difference between a deadline and a bear. When you live in a constant state of stress or scarcity, your system behaves as if danger is always present. Over time, this reduces your capacity for compassion, empathy, creativity, it affects your feelings of power and it affects the decisions you make.

Fear-based environments restrict innovation and risk-taking. Environments rooted in psychological safety and compassion activate trust, imagination and learning.

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Power, prediction and plasticity

The brain is a prediction machine. It constantly scans the environment and guesses what will happen next based on past experience. If you have power, your predictions are shaped by repeated access to resources and rewards. That can make you more confident but also less attentive

to risk or dissent. Often, if you have less power, your brain predicts threats more often, tuning you to danger and caution.

Both are understandable responses to context, but they shape how we lead.. Redistribution of power whether through shared decision-making, more inclusive processes, or transparent communication, helps correct these internal biases. Making organisations more adaptive, resilient, and fair.

This is also where neuroplasticity comes in. Like a muscle, compassion and self-regulation grow with use. Power can make us less attuned to others, but with awareness and practice, we can retrain our responses. Exercises such as perspective-taking, compassion meditation, and storytelling can build new neural pathways that increase social connection and empathy.

Why compassion matters in governance

Governance exists to hold organisations to account for their vision, values, strategy, ethics, and solvency. It shapes the work, but it does not deliver it. In times like these, when politics, finance and culture collide, governance requires courage and clarity.

Compassion is not softness. It is courage in action. It's the ability to stay connected while making difficult decisions. The difference between simply managing risk and leading through it.

Leaders and trustees who act with compassion are more likely to build psychological safety- the foundation for trust and innovation. They create space for dialogue instead of defensiveness, for accountability rather than blame. Compassion helps leaders stay curious, humble, and open to change.

It also allows for self-forgiveness. Many of us in this room are Millennial or Generation X leaders who reached our positions by pushing through, often at personal cost. The world is changing and our ways of leading must evolve too. Compassion for ourselves is not indulgent; it is the prerequisite for sustainable leadership.

From the margins to the mainstream

There is much to learn from those who have always had to navigate power differently. Leaders who govern from the margins, shaped by disability, race, gender, or class, often

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carry a deep understanding of justice, resilience, and interdependence. Their experience shows that compassion and power are not opposites. They are complementary forces.

As we move through this conference- holding these ideas I've shared- I invite you to consider two questions:

1. What **one act** could redistribute power in your boardroom this month?
2. How can compassion make your governance braver?

In closing

Governance is not just policy and compliance. It's a human practice shaped by the biology of connection, the psychology of trust, and the politics of power.

The world around us is uncertain. Systems are strained. But in this room, today you have agency. You have influence. You have power.

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Suzanne Alleyne is a cultural thinker, researcher, and founder of Alleyne&. Her ongoing research project, The Neurology of Power™, explores how understanding where power lives in the brain and body can transform leadership, culture, and governance.

Follow her on LinkedIn or find out more about Alleyne& at alleyneand.com and allaboutpower.org

