

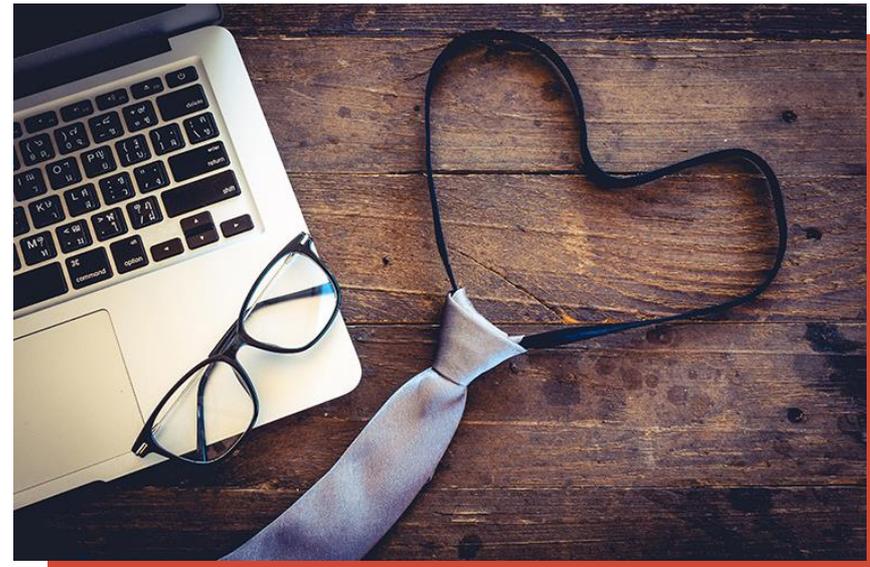
Leading with Love: Why Leaders Should Bring Their Heart to Work

When people think about what is required to operate a successful business, they think of business models, revenue, profit, competition, and marketing to name a few. These are certainly vital components, but one item that is often missing from the list is love. Leaders often shy away from this word, but it can represent the secret to success for any organization.

Keep in mind that we are not talking about romantic love or sugar-sweet ideas like rainbows and butterflies. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic." Leaders who prioritize humanity, compassion, and purpose in the workplace tap into employees' deep wells of innovation, creativity, and productivity.

Leading with Fear vs. Leading with Love

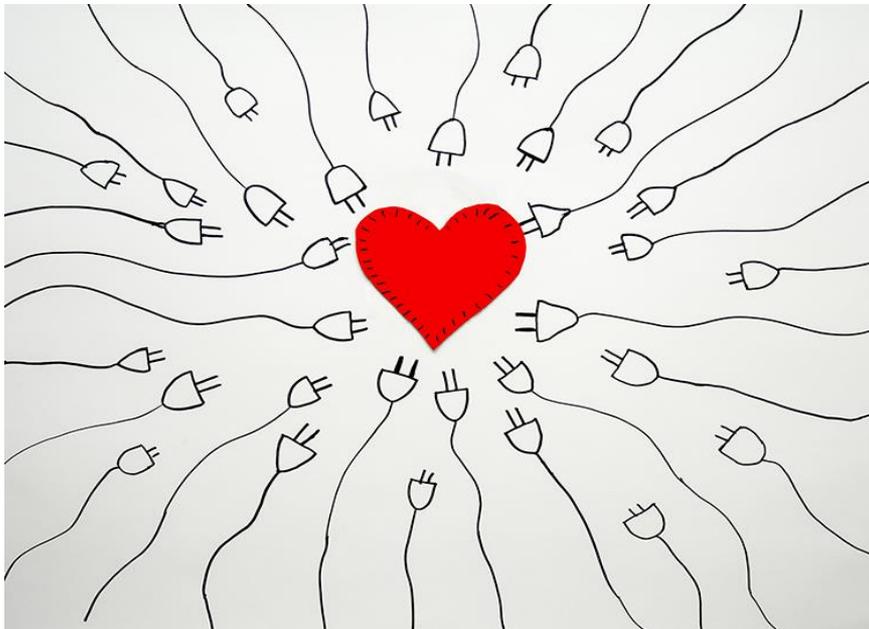
For years, leading through fear was the predominant model. Until the 50s and 60s, corporal punishment was common at home and in schools, based on the belief that imposing painful penalties for bad behavior and rewarding acceptable behavior was the best way to ensure conformity and compliance with rules. However, we now know that physical punishment actually increases aggression and antisocial behavior. Today, in most places, teachers would lose their job if they struck a child as punishment. Likewise, most leaders have moved away from a punishment-based approach in the workplace as the study of motivational



psychology has evolved.

Some leaders still adopt a fear-based approach because they believe that showing a softer side encourages employees to slack off or ignore rules. They subscribe to the belief that people should either meet expectations or suffer consequences. These leaders may use intimidation or bullying to inspire compliance, constantly threatening to fire employees for any misstep, or making public examples of anyone that makes a mistake. While some employees are attracted to this style, a [2018 study](#) showed that managing employees with pressure tactics resulted in a 90% increase in expected turnover. Leaders that adopted more inspirational tactics experienced a 68% decrease in turnover. [Research](#) shows that in workplaces with very toxic (fear-based) leadership, employees will actively engage in counterproductive work behaviors as a form of retaliation against their co-workers and bosses.

Leading from a place of fear ultimately shrinks creativity and reduces productivity. Teams that are afraid of being judged or humiliated are less likely to share ideas, point out gaps or errors in a process, or ask questions about assignments. They are more likely to risk spending their time doing the wrong work than approaching their leader to clarify an issue, leading to problems and increased costs due to re-work. In his book, *Out of the Crisis*, W. Edwards Deming first shared his [14 key management principles](#) to improve any business or organization's effectiveness. The 8th principle is to drive out fear. He explains that no one can put in their best performance unless they feel secure and has noted that, "Fear invites wrong figures. Bearers of bad news fare badly. To keep his job, anyone may present to his boss only good news." When people feel secure at work, they are more likely to be honest about problems that arise and share their ideas about solving them.



Workers Need Love Now More Than Ever

Many studies show that there is a rise in loneliness around the world. In a [2018 survey](#) by Cigna, nearly half of Americans reported that they sometimes or always feel alone or left out. One in four rarely or never feel as though there are people who understand them. Worse, a follow-up survey from January of 2020 shows that now three out of five Americans report being lonely, and that was before the widespread isolation caused by the global pandemic. This has serious business consequences, as lonely workers are less engaged and less productive. They are twice as likely to miss a day of work due to illness and five times as likely to miss work due to stress. The study also found that remote workers are more likely to report loneliness than in-person workers, which is troubling given the rapid move to remote work due to COVID-19.

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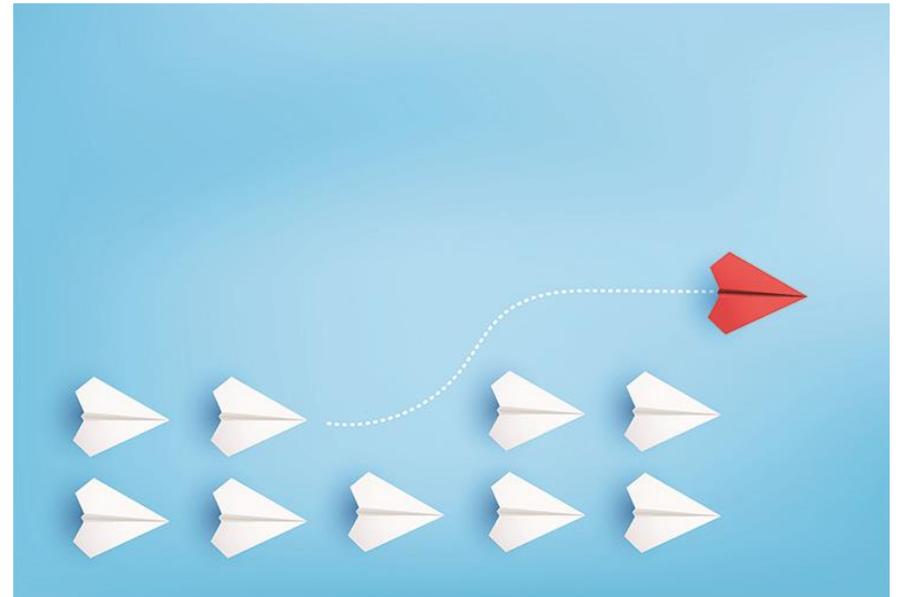
[In a 20-year study](#) on work-based predictors of mortality, researchers found that positive social support can reduce mortality risk. Douglas Nemecek, M.D., chief medical officer for Behavioral Health at Cigna, explains, "There is an inherent link between loneliness and the workplace, with employers in a unique position to be a critical part of the solution. Fortunately, these results clearly point to the benefits meaningful in-person connections can have on loneliness, including those in the workplace." We need leaders to take action now to facilitate meaningful connections and foster a collaborative environment.

Love is a Competitive Advantage

Herb Kelleher, co-founder of Southwest Airlines, once said, "A company is stronger if bound by love than by fear." In fact, the stock ticker for Southwest Airlines is LUV. He never believed that the discipline needed to run a successful airline that provides excellent service was mutually exclusive with treating employees and customers like family and making work fun. It turns out he was right, and as of 2019, Southwest Airlines had 46 consecutive years of profitability to show for it.

In his best-selling book, *Love is Just Damn Good Business*, Steve Farber explains, "When love is part of an organization's framework, employees and customers feel genuinely valued. Employees are more loyal, innovative, creative and inspired. They are then more likely, in a meaningful and sustainable way over time, to produce products, services, and experiences that their customers will love. As a result, customers reciprocate with their loyalty, referrals, and, of course, money. Healthy employee relationships and customer retention, combined with the growth and abundance associated with love-based decisions, make for an overall healthy and successful business."

In a longitudinal study of a long-term care work setting, Sigal Barsade and Olivia A. O'Neill discovered that employees who felt they worked in a loving, caring culture reported higher satisfaction levels, fewer absences, and had better patient outcomes. A follow-up study of other industries, including financial services, real estate, and others, revealed the same thing. People who worked in a caring culture where they felt free to express affection and



compassion for one another were more satisfied with their jobs, more committed to the organization, and felt more accountable for their own performance.

George Vaillant, director of an 80-year study of adult development that followed Harvard graduates over their lifetime, explained that his greatest learning was, "Happiness is love. Full stop." The study found that loving relationships were the most prominent indicators of both happiness and earned income. And a [2019 University of Stanford Study](#) found that employees are 13% more productive when they are happy. Additionally, in *The Buddha and the Badass*, Vishen Lakhani details that when the mind is in a positive state, productivity rises by 31%, sales success increases by 37%, intelligence, creativity, and even memory function all improve dramatically.

Love is a Leadership Skill

The evidence is clear, creating a culture where employees feel respected and cared for leads to better business outcomes. But how can leaders implement "love" in their management style? Leading with love does not mean that managers have to become best friends with every employee or say yes anytime they want to leave work early. Leaders can approach employees and colleagues as people that deserve respect and compassion while still maintaining authority and setting appropriate boundaries. Learning how to create a supportive and collaborative environment requires self-awareness and practice. There are some simple ways that leaders can show their love in the workplace.

1. **Be Curious.** Ask people about themselves, their family, their hobbies, etc. Ask for their opinions and really listen. When people get to know one other and see each other's humanity, it fosters empathy and respect. When people feel seen and heard, they feel cared for and are more likely to care about their colleagues and customers.
2. **Be Vulnerable.** Vulnerability leads to trust, and leaders must show the way. Sharing struggles and imperfections humanizes leaders, making them more approachable and more likable. Trying to maintain a perfect image is not only exhausting; it pushes people away. A leader that can admit their flaws and mistakes, and forgives them in others, will build trust with their teams.
3. **Be Trustworthy.** A leader is only as good as their word. Keep promises and set clear expectations. Don't delay tough conversations. The longer you wait, the less credibility you will have. A trustworthy leader believes

the best about people and operates on the assumption that most people want to do the right thing. Skepticism and suspicion are not conducive to a supportive and trusting culture.

4. **Embrace Individuality.** Loving leaders let employees see their true personality. When people sense someone is not authentic, it erodes trust. Likewise, managers should not be prescriptive about how employees should behave on the job. Allow them to bring their full selves to work. Southwest Airlines co-founder Herb Kelleher put it best when he said, "We've never thought you should have to come to work and assume a mask...and look like you're a bunch of little lead soldiers stamped out of a mold. We give people license to be themselves." Allowing for expressions of individuality opens the door to creativity and innovation.
5. **Be Tough, But Never Mean.** As most parents know, love often means enforcing the rules. Loving an organization means staying committed to excellence, and that requires accountability. Having tough discussions when someone has not lived up to expectations is part of leadership. These conversations should be tough but constructive, avoiding personal attacks and angry words. Tough love means solving the problems together and finding opportunities for growth and improvement when mistakes are made.



- 6. Connect Work with a Greater Purpose.** The goal of making money is not enough. Leaders who give a greater meaning to work will have more engaged employees and more loyal customers. In his book *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*, Adam Grant shares research that shows that when people are aware of how their work helps others, they are more protected from stress and burnout. He found that students working in a call center to raise scholarship money increased revenue five times after meeting a scholarship recipient in person. Radiologists evaluating CT scans have a 46% improvement in diagnostic accuracy if a patient's photo is included. A leader's role is to help people see the importance and meaning of their daily tasks.
- 7. Bring Everyone to the Table.** Leading with love means being truly inclusive and giving everyone a voice. Implementing inclusive hiring practices will ensure a diverse workforce that includes people from different backgrounds, races, and genders. Loving leaders seek out feedback from employees of all titles and status. Inviting these various ideas and opinions to the table will inspire innovation.



- 8. Share the Wealth.** Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich has outlined [two compelling reasons](#) to share financial success with employees. First, to attract and retain talent, you must pay for it. Second, if you want talent to work with the same enthusiasm as ownership, you must trade equity for it. While money is not the only motivation when choosing an organization to work for, companies that pay competitive and fair salaries, have performance bonus plans, and stock options build trust and respect with their employees. Companies that are not transparent about wages or have large pay disparities between races or genders will see higher turnover and lose talented workers.
- 9. Have Fun at Work.** People who have fun at work are happier, and happier people are more productive. In fact, many studies have shown that having fun improves immunity, elevates endorphins, reduces incidents of disease, and decreases work absences. It also builds better teams. Consider having regular team outings or impromptu games and contests that break up the monotony of the workweek. Ask employees for ideas to find out what is fun for them!
- 10. Keep Learning.** True leaders never stop learning. They also encourage others to do the same. Seek out opportunities for personal and team development. Leaders can show love for their employees by helping them develop their skills and move forward in their careers. Investing in a [leadership development program](#) can be a great way to improve performance and create stronger relationships with team members.

As Steve Farber says, "Do what you love in the service of people who love what you do." Bringing your heart to work might feel awkward at first, but taking any or all of the above actions can inspire people to achieve success and, in turn,

inspire others. People spend more than a third of their lives at work, and leaders can make that a meaningful and positive experience or an unfulfilling and loveless one. Choosing to lead with love improves the performance of individuals and organizations as a whole. As the business world copes with the challenges of a global pandemic and economic recovery, there is no better time to bring your heart to work.



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