What’s Love Got to Do with Work?

Key Concept
A culture of companionate love — defined as affection and compassion — in the workplace can lead to greater employee satisfaction and engagement, while a culture that undermines such emotions leads to unhappy workers... and customers.

Idea Summary
Love is not a word often found in management literature, although the consensus now recognizes the power of emotions in motivating (or demotivating) people. Daniel Goleman and others have popularized the influence of emotions in effective leadership. But even in discussions involving emotions, rarely does the word ‘love’ come up. Love in the workplace? Don’t most companies have rules against such a thing?

New research shows that companionate love, defined as feelings of affection, compassion, caring and tenderness for others, can in fact impact employee morale and effectiveness. In organizations that featured a culture of companionate love — the research focused first on the health care industry — employees were more engaged, less emotionally exhausted, and more satisfied with their jobs, and worked better in teams. From the customer perspective — in this research, patients and their families — a culture of companionate love led to more pleasant moods (as assessed by staff), more satisfaction and a higher quality of life. The families of patients were also more likely to recommend the facility when such a culture existed.

While the health care field might be an industry in which companionate love can play a part, some might question its applicability to other industries. When the same research was extended beyond health care to more than 3,000 employees in other industries, the correlation between companionate love and employee and customer satisfaction was repeated. Not all industries showed the same level of companionate care although, surprisingly, the greatest
range of companionate love occurred within industries rather than between industries. In some firms in the financial industry, for example, rated very low on companionate love, while others rated as high as any health care company.

Can there be too much companionate love? It's possible. If team members are too compassionate and caring, they may overlook unethical behaviour on the part of one of their members. This indeed happened when physicians in a group medical practice overlooked the accounting fraud of one of their own because of their compassion for him following a natural disaster that hit his home.

**Business Application**

While there may always be certain employees who are caring and empathetic, companionate love has a direct impact on employee and customer satisfaction (and thus reducing employee turnover and customer loyalty) when it is encouraged and nurtured as part of the organizational culture. Southwest Airlines, PepsiCo and Whole Foods (which has a set of principles that begin with 'love') are some of the larger companies that are not afraid to emphasize the importance of affection and caring as part of the values and principles of the firm. Look at your company's statement of principles and values: does the word 'love' or 'caring' appear? How does your statement of values and principles compare to the following statement from Zappos: "We are more than a team though...we are a family. We watch out for each other, care for each other and go above and beyond for each other."

Just as important, are such sentiments conveyed through the attitudes and behaviours encouraged and modelled by the leaders of the firm? Employees and managers will take their cues from the top. No matter what the mission statements might say, a culture is built through the actions of executives first.

It is important that emotional culture and cognitive culture are not mutually exclusive. Your organization can still emphasize results while encouraging caring and compassion. Both American Airlines and Southwest Airlines have a results- and achievement-oriented cultures, Southwest believe that expressing authentic emotions is the best way to build these results; for American Airlines, success comes from being the emotionally restrained 'stainless steel' airline.

**Further Reading**

Further Relevant Resources

Sigal G. Barsade's profile at The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania
Olivia A. O'Neill's profile at George Mason University School of Management
The Wharton School's Executive Education profile at IEDP