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Employees Who Feel Love Perform Better

by Sigal Barsade and Olivia (Mandy) O'Neill | 11:00 AM January 13, 2014

“Love” is a not word you often hear uttered in office hallways or conference rooms. And yet, it has a strong influence on workplace outcomes. The more love co-workers feel at work, the more engaged they are. (Note: Here we’re talking about “companionate love” which is far less intense than romantic love. Companionate love is based on warmth, affection, and connection rather than passion). It may not be surprising that those who perceive greater affection and caring from their colleagues perform better, but few managers focus on building an emotional culture. That’s a mistake.

In our longitudinal study, “What’s Love Got to Do With It?: The Influence of a Culture of Companionate Love in the Long-term Care Setting (<http://mgmt.wharton.upenn.edu/?LinkServID=1CCA2143-EBC7-4D12-A47F360C2FF68CBC>)” (forthcoming in *Administrative Science Quarterly* (<http://www.johnson.cornell.edu/Administrative-Science-Quarterly.aspx>)), surveyed 185 employees, 108 patients, and 42 patient family members at two points in time, 16 months apart, at a large, nonprofit long-term healthcare facility and hospital in the Northeast. Using multiple raters and multiple methods, we explored the influence that emotional culture has on employee, patient, and family outcomes. What we learned demonstrates how important emotional culture is when it comes to employee and client well-being and performance.

Employees who felt they worked in a loving, caring culture reported higher levels of satisfaction and teamwork. They showed up to work more often. Our research also demonstrated that this type of culture related directly to client outcomes, including improved patient mood, quality of life, satisfaction, and fewer trips to the ER.

While this study took place in a long-term care setting — which many people might consider biased toward the “emotional” — these findings hold true across industries. We conducted a follow-up study, surveying 3,201 employees in seven different industries from financial services to real estate and the results were the same. People who worked in a culture where they felt free to express affection, tenderness, caring, and compassion for one another were more satisfied with their jobs, committed to the organization, and accountable for their performance.

So what does a culture of companionate love look like? Imagine a pair of co-workers collaborating side by side, each day expressing caring and affection towards one another, safeguarding each other’s feelings, showing tenderness and compassion when things don’t go well. Now imagine a workplace that encourages those behaviors from everyone, where managers actively look for ways to create and reinforce close workplace relationships among employees.

Some large, well-known organizations are already leading the pack in creating cultures of companionate love.

Whole Foods Market has a set of management principles that begin with “Love” and PepsiCo lists “caring” as its first guiding principle on its website. Zappos also explicitly focuses on caring as part of its values: “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”.

You might think all this “love business” would be hard for some people. We did, too, before we started this study, but we found love in some unlikely places. For example, we talked with employees at a large aerospace defense contractor who told us about a newly acquired division that had a strong culture of love. Employees there routinely greeted each other with a kiss on the cheek. Visiting executives from the parent company were alarmed to see this gesture, finding it not only inappropriate but possibly an invitation to sexual harassment lawsuits. Although they initially tried to prohibit such displays of affection, ultimately they decided to allow the culture to flourish within the division, simply acknowledging that it was not consistent with the more muted values of the rest of the organization.

Surely not every manager will want to gather his team for a group hug every day (nor would every employee be comfortable with that). But there are many other ways to build an emotional culture of companionate love. We suggest leaders do at least three things.

First, broaden your definition of culture. Instead of focusing on “cognitive culture” — values such as teamwork, results-orientation, or innovation — you might think about how you can cultivate and enrich emotional culture as well. Emotional culture can be based on love or other emotions, such as joy or pride.

Second, pay attention to the emotions you’re expressing to employees every day. Your mood creates a cultural blueprint for the group.

Third, consider how your company policies and practices can foster greater affection, caring, compassion, and tenderness among workers. For example, Cisco CEO John Chambers asked that he be notified within 48 hours if a close member of an employee’s family passed away. At some companies, employees can forego vacation days or organize emergency funds to help fellow employees who are struggling and need help.

Most importantly, though, it is the small moments between coworkers — a warm smile, a kind note, a sympathetic ear — day after day, month after month, that help create and maintain a strong culture of companionate love and the employee satisfaction, productivity, and client satisfaction that comes with it.

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