

The Science of Work

Insights on the human aspects of the working world from Wharton faculty
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Feeling the Love—At Work

Why managers should foster “companionate love”

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Imagine you are a tax accountant at a high-powered firm. There’s a death in your family and it happens at the height of tax season. How will your co-workers, already completely swamped with work, respond when you have to take time off? They might say, “Oh, gosh, sorry—good luck getting your work done.” On the other hand, if the company has established a culture of “companionate love,” colleagues might take a deep breath and say, “Go spend time with your family. Don’t worry about work. We’ll cover for you.”

Believe it or not, companies with this kind of culture do exist—even big firms. A real-world example of a culture of companionate love can be found in employees’ responses, at the global equipment firm Barry-Wehmiller, to the news that every worker would have to take an unpaid four-week furlough so that no layoffs would be necessary. The CEO reported that “the reaction was extraordinary” as some team members offered to take double furloughs to fill in for co-workers they knew couldn’t afford to lose the pay (Chapman, 2013).

And at another company, co-workers of a woman diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis tried to help her cope with her daily injections by bringing her breakfast and flowers to work. Describing the experience to researchers, she said, “My co-workers showed me more love and compassion than I ever would have imagined.” (Lilius et al., 2005).

So what is companionate love? A far less intense emotion than its conceptual cousin, romantic love (Hatfield and Rapson, 1993, 2000), companionate love is based on warmth, connection (Fehr, 1988; Sternberg, 1988), and the “affection we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply intertwined” (Berscheid and Walster, 1978, p.177; Reis and Aron, 2008). It is a social, “other-focused” emotion, promoting interdependence and sensitivity toward other people (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Gonzaga et al., 2001).

Interestingly, the word “love,” and emotions in general, have been largely absent from research about work life for nearly 75 years. Somewhere along the line, talking about love became “unprofessional.” Yet it’s notable that the people we spend most of our waking hours with are our co-workers and (companionate) love can certainly be part of our daily work lives and can influence our job attitudes and productivity.

My colleague Olivia “Mandy” O’Neill, an assistant professor of management at George Mason University, and I built a theory of a culture of companionate love—based on the degree to which employees express affection, caring, compassion and tenderness towards each other—and then tested that theory by examining that culture’s influence on employee outcomes. In other words, how does the amount of companionate love in an organization relate to the kinds of results that employers and employees actually care about? Our study, reported in [“What’s Love](#)

Got to Do with It? A Longitudinal Study of the Culture of Companionate Love and Employee and Client Outcomes in the Long-Term Care Setting" (forthcoming in *Administrative Science Quarterly*) focused on a long-term care facility for elderly patients, most of whom had Alzheimer's, dementia, or other severe impairments. The study involved 185 employees of this facility, 108 patients, and 42 patient family members in different units.

What did we find after measuring companionate love among employees within different units? We discovered that the units with a stronger culture of companionate love had significantly higher levels of employee satisfaction and teamwork--and lower levels of absenteeism and emotional burnout. Moreover, the positive effect rippled out to the facility's residents: better mood, more satisfaction, improved quality of life. The effect went beyond the psychological: patients in units with a higher level of companionate love had fewer unnecessary trips to the emergency room. Even patients' families were more satisfied.

We were excited about this result, but then we thought, as you might be thinking: healthcare naturally lends itself to being a caring, compassionate environment—but what about other industries? So we began extending our research to workplaces where the companionate love is not such an obvious fit. We measured the culture of companionate love of 3,201 employees across biopharmaceuticals, engineering, financial services, higher education, real estate, travel, and utilities. The results from these industries—including stereotypically more analytical, results-driven ones like finance—held steady. More companionate love reported in the culture was associated with more employee satisfaction, commitment and personal accountability.

All this is good news for managers because a culture of companionate love, like other cultures, doesn't usually arise spontaneously; managers, as lots of other research has shown, have an outsize influence on the culture of an organization, since employees look to them to set the tone. The primary determinant of how much companionate love will exist in a manager's group – is the companionate love expressed by the manager him or herself – are you affectionate and compassion with your people, or do you give off the impression that you just don't care? This means managers can promote a culture of companionate love, just as they can (intentionally or not) promote a competitive culture, a customer-oriented culture, or a results-oriented culture. They can do this by modeling the behavior themselves, creating structures that enable expressions of companionate love, and giving those behaviors formal recognition. For example, at Cisco Systems there was a policy that required the CEO to be informed within 48 hours of any employee (or their immediate family) who become seriously ill or died. To make this policy work, the company created the "Serious Health Notification System" that helped the information reach the CEO quickly (Kanov et al., 2004). Another effective tool was used at an Internet company called Next Jump, whose CEO instituted "NxJ Love Day," a surprise day off in appreciation of the sacrifices employees make to express their affection toward each other. In one employee's description of this day, he wrote: "That small act of kindness really made us feel that our CEO appreciated and "loved" us!" Similarly, Zappos focuses on caring with the value statement, "We are more than a team...we are a family." At some companies, employees can forego vacation days or organize emergency funds for colleagues in difficult circumstances. And firms can use an "employee of the month" type of recognition to highlight compassionate acts.

The most dramatic demonstrations of companionate love appear when disaster strikes, but what really sustains a culture of companionate love are the small everyday moments among employees. Your teammate brings you a soda and your favorite pretzels because she knows you're "chained to your desk" on a deadline. Someone comments to a fellow employee that they're looking especially happy, or notices that you are a bit down.

What's more, the culture doesn't have to pervade an entire company to be effective. For example, employees in a newly acquired division of an aerospace contractor we spoke with habitually greeted each other with a kiss on the cheek. Although corporate officers at the parent company were upset to discover this ritual—fearing harassment lawsuits and the like—the executives ultimately accepted that the affectionate greeting was the division's unique expression of a culture of companionate love.

If you're a manager, keep in mind that being low in companionate love doesn't necessarily mean that a manager is actively unpleasant. As Elie Wiesel famously said, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference." Employees notice a lack of caring and compassion and respond to this indifference in ways that are not good for them, for you, or for the company. With so many positive effects for employees their customers and companies, companionate love is a natural, legitimate, and productive emotion to have at work. And we need more of it.

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