

I JUST WORK HERE

Don't be afraid of love in the workplace

Not in the 'call HR' way – in the 'love your fellow humans' way, which can make the office a much better place

January 20, 2014 | Rex Huppke | I Just Work Here

Mention [love](#) at the office and minds go to tawdry affairs, lines crossed and calls to human resources.

People see love as a squishy emotion, one that breeds conflict, a distraction. So it has largely been drummed out of the workplace.

That's a shame. Focus on the pitfalls of romantic love and you'll miss the importance of love's broader meaning: kindness; respect; empathy.

With that in mind, and in the words of famed workplace expert Celine Dion, let's talk about love.

Companies are undoubtedly trending toward more compassionate cultures, but there has been little recognition in professional or academic circles about how central love is to a truly caring work environment.

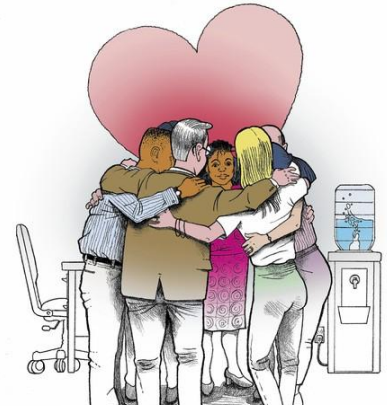
Sigal Barsade, a management professor at the [University](#) of Pennsylvania's Wharton [School](#), and Olivia O'Neill, an assistant professor of management at George Mason University, have conducted a study that shows how "a culture of companionate love" is good for employees and clients.

The study defines companionate love as the sense of warmth, affection and the friendly connections that bind us. Barsade said she believes our inability to separate the idea of passionate love from companionate love is the reason love is so often overlooked in the workplace.

"Within the management domain, the word 'love' evokes this concept of this soft, fuzzy thing that you really can't take seriously at work," she said. "But companionate love is one of the basic emotions of human experience. Given how much time we spend at work, it's actually ignorant to think it wouldn't be a part of our work lives."

The longitudinal study, which will be published in an upcoming edition of the journal *Administrative Science Quarterly*, surveyed patients, their [family](#) members, and workers at a long-term health care facility. Employees who felt they worked in a "culture of companionate love" had less absenteeism, were better at teamwork, were more satisfied with their jobs and experienced lower levels of emotional exhaustion. In turn, the facility's clients and their [families](#) were happier with the service they received.

The researchers did a follow-up survey of 3,201 workers in seven industries, just to show that the results weren't specific to the health care field. Barsade and O'Neill wrote in a recent post on the Harvard Business Review's website: "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."



(Tribune illustration by Rick Tuma)

This all seems rather sensible. So I asked Barsade: Why don't companies just do this anyway?

She said management literature from the early 1900s to the late 1930s does discuss "the concept of love and caring as part of work."

"But I think people's perspective on what kind of emotions mattered at work, if they mattered at all, narrowed in World War II as the focus became more, 'How do we keep people satisfied?'" Barsade said. "Emotion turned into satisfaction, and that changed the focus to wages and how the job is designed. Emotion somehow was either ignored or became illegitimate. We started thinking that people shouldn't have emotions at work, and if they do, they should be repressed."

The study cites two examples, one of a workplace with a strong culture of companionate love, the other without. In the first, an employee is quoted as saying: "We are a family. When you walk in the door, you can feel it. Everyone cares for each other regardless of whatever level you are in. We all watch out for each other."

In the second, a veteran employee of 30 years tells her supervisor that her mother-in-law has died, and the supervisor responds by bluntly saying: "I have staff that handles this. I don't want to deal with it."

That's a sizable difference, and it's easy to see which workplace is going to have more loyal and motivated workers.

So if your workplace lacks companionate love, how did you improve?

Barsade said some of it can be mandated: "For example, say you're a manager and you get copied on an email chain between two employees that's not civil. And you got to them and say: 'This is not acceptable here. We don't speak to each other that way.' I actually think we can be a lot more explicit about what our norms are, about how we interact with one another."

Of course, a change in culture has to not only be dictated by those in charge, it has to be demonstrated by them as well. Bosses can provide employees with flexibility, pay them well and show them they are trusted and valued. They can also — and here we get into my mantra again — behave like decent human beings.

"Management has to show it too," Barsade said. "Not just structurally, but through their own facial expressions, body language and behavior. People show love at work because they feel it. It becomes a normative expectation that this is how you behave here."

This doesn't mean we spend the day hugging and gently consoling people when they screw up. Rules and ethics can stand on equal footing with a culture of companionate love — we respect and care for each other AND we follow the rules of the company.

I can see some writing this off as too sappy for the hard-knock world of business. If that's what you think, consider how much better you function when you feel cared for and supported.

Then imagine if that sense of love didn't have to stay home when you leave for work each day.

TALK TO REX: Ask workplace questions — anonymously or by name — and share stories with Rex Hupke at ijustworkhere@tribune.com, like Rex on Facebook at [facebook.com/rexworkshere](https://www.facebook.com/rexworkshere) and find more at [chicagotribune.com/ijustworkhere](https://www.chicagotribune.com/ijustworkhere).